

NEW

★ IN THE DARK OF NIGHT: BRITS IN GLIDERS SECURED TWO BRIDGES ★

Bringing History to Life

History's biggest invasion

Two months after D-Day, Paris was liberated

D DAY

80 YEARS AGO

BLOODBATH ON OMAHA BEACH

90% of US troops died in the first attack wave

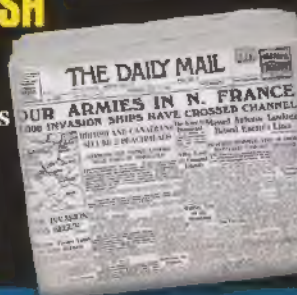
HITLER SLEPT ON

No one dared to wake the Führer as the Germans were caught off-guard



THE BRITISH ADVANCE

Montgomery's troops set course for Caen



19-YEAR-OLD EYEWITNESS: "WHY WERE THEY KILLED AND I WASN'T?"



EUROPE - June 1944



WELCOME

For four years, the Nazi yoke had hung heavy over mainland France when dawn broke on 6th June 1944. It was 06.30 and from their machine-gun positions on the Normandy beaches, German soldiers could see a sight that must have been equal parts awe-inspiring and terrifying. Ahead of them in the choppy waters of the English Channel lay the largest invasion fleet the world had ever seen. More than 150,000 Allied soldiers were ready to sacrifice everything to finally set foot on the European mainland again. D-Day was underway.

Fourteen hours later, as the day drew to a close, the Allies had secured a beachhead across a 80-kilometre stretch of coastline, and thousands of soldiers and tonnes of equipment poured forth in a huge wave that the German army couldn't possibly withstand. Two months later, Paris was liberated, and less than a year later, British and US troops were deep inside the Third Reich, Hitler shot himself and Nazi Germany surrendered.

In this issue, we tell the full story of those crucial hours and days of June 1944, told by the eyewitnesses who were there when the invasion was at its most critical phase. You can read about the elite British soldiers who captured two crucial bridges in a daring attack, preventing German reinforcements from reaching them. And you can follow in the footsteps of the US paratroopers who, with horrific losses, were dropped over Normandy in the dark of night and, despite their impossible situation, managed to defeat German gun positions and save the lives of thousands of Allied soldiers heading for the beaches in small landing craft.

Enjoy the issue!

The small town of Sainte Mère-Eglise was one of the primary targets for US paratroopers on D-Day. The village was located near Utah Beach and important roads crossed through it.



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One thing would be crucial to the success of D-Day: control of two bridges over the Caen Canal and the River Orne. The task was handed to 181 elite British soldiers, who were the first to set course for Normandy.

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Following the 101st Airborne

On the night before D-Day, 7,000 US paratroopers were dropped over Normandy. Their mission was to capture dangerous German gun positions and prevent German reinforcements from reaching the invasion beaches.

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D-Day

War's last eyewitness

Arden Earl was one of the first to set foot on Omaha Beach. Eighteen of the 32 men in the landing craft with him died, and Earl still wonders how he survived.

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Bloodbath on Omaha Beach

At 06.35 on 6th June 1944, the bow gate slammed down on the first US landing craft. Seconds later, all hell broke loose.

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British fought to get ashore

British soldiers overwhelmed the German defences on Gold, Sword and Juno beaches in a matter of hours. Then they moved inland towards the strategic objective of Caen.

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The Germans fought back

Three German panzer divisions and 300,000 men stood ready to counter-attack. For seven days, they tried to wipe out the Allies before it was too late.

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An expert explains

A determined counter-attack might have ensured German victory on D-Day – so argues an expert who identifies Rommel as the decisive factor.


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Invasion's toughest city battle

Important roads and a key railway route ran through the small town of Carentan. Whoever controlled it held the key to Normandy – and both sides knew it. On 10th June, one of the invasion's most decisive battles began.

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German prisoners near Carentan.
*The battle for the important city raged
for four days before it finally fell into
Allied hands.*

“If they would only fight us man
to man we would have a chance.”

German lieutenant Hans Heinze knew that Allied air supremacy would decide the battle.



On the evening of 5th June, 181 elite British soldiers began D-Day with one of the most important operations of the invasion: the capture of the Pegasus and Horsa bridges.



Normandy, 5th June 1944

ATTACK ON TWO BRIDGES

I could see it all, the
river and the canal
like strips of silver
in the moonlight.

Pilot Jim Wallwork during the approach to the attack target.

Attack on two bridges

On 5th June 1944, 181 British soldiers boarded six gliders in the south of England. Their mission was to capture two crucial bridges in Normandy. If they succeeded, the Germans would not be able to bring in reinforcements when D-Day began a few hours later. If the men's mission failed, the entire invasion would be in jeopardy.

By Henrik Ronsboe

Late in the evening of 5th June 1944, 11-year-old Alain Doix stood by the window, staring wide-eyed at the night sky. The French boy had just been woken by the noise of anti-aircraft guns around Caen, a few kilometres away. From his room in the small town of Bénouville, he could see the glow of German searchlights sweeping across the sky in pursuit of the silhouettes of Allied bombers. Their rays reflected off the brass knobs on the bedposts as the boy left the window and walked to his grandmother sleeping in the same room.

"Wake up! Wake up, Grandmama. I think something is happening."

At that moment, Alain's father, René, entered the bedroom. Together, the French family gazed out of the window of their house in one of Normandy's many small towns. As fate would have it, the Doix family lived right where D-Day would begin on that dark June night: in a house by two bridges, one over the Caen Canal and the other over the River Orne. From their home, the family were eyewitnesses to one of the most important events in world history. But

the Doix family could hardly have known this, as they suddenly spied what appeared to be planes flying low over the fields. In the distance, the sound of German anti-aircraft guns near Caen echoed, but outside the window, dark silhouettes glided silently through the air.

"My God, those aren't planes!" René Doix exclaimed. "They're gliders!"

D-Day began silently

What unfolded in the sky as the clock struck midnight was the beginning of the largest landings in history. D-Day was underway and 11 months later, US and British troops would push Hitler's once-mighty forces so far back into Germany that the Nazis would surrender, bringing an end to World War II in Europe. And it all began here, with six 20-metre gliders, dark and silent, gliding unnoticed past German anti-aircraft fire with 181 British soldiers on board.

In a surprise attack, the elite troops were tasked with capturing two strategically important bridges over the River Orne and a parallel canal connecting Caen to the English Channel. Capturing the two bridges eight kilometres from the coast would make it difficult for German panzer forces to move into the area from either east or west. This would make life much easier for the main Allied forces landing from both air and sea a few hours later as 6th June dawned.

The Allies also needed the bridges for their advance. Therefore, the aim was to take the bridges as quickly as possible before the Germans could blow them up. To accomplish the first part of the task, each glider had

German high command knew of the strategic importance of the bridges over the Caen Canal and the River Orne, ensuring they were heavily fortified.





two pilots: one at the controls and another who kept an eye on its altimeter, compass, stopwatch and speed. The men had practised this moment repeatedly in the months leading up to the attack. The 16 pilots – two for each aircraft plus four in reserve – had been pushed hard during training, learning how to complete the approach and land in a very confined area, virtually blind and in all weather conditions. They'd practised both at night and while wearing dark-lensed glasses designed to help simulate night landings.

Now the gliders approached French soil.

Pilots ejected

The soldiers crammed into the back of the gliders had also undergone rigorous training. They were part of the British Army's airborne troops and belonged to the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Although trained to parachute out or attack silently from gliders, many soldiers suffered from airsickness in the shaky gliders, whose flimsy wooden skeletons amplified every gust of wind. In an attempt to alleviate the discomfort, the soldiers had been fed a low-fat meal before their 22.45 departure from a base near Bournemouth. They'd also been encouraged to sing along the way, so it was to the sound of 'It's A

Long Way To Tipperary' that pilot Jim Wallwork steered the lead glider, Horsa 1, towards its target:

"It was a midnight crossing in a rugby dressing-room atmosphere with songs and jokes. At 6,000 feet, when we heard 'cast off' [from the tug], the singing stopped," Wallwork later recalled about the order to detach the aircraft from the plane that had been towing it towards French territory.

Although the 28 soldiers packed inside were only lightly armed with rifles, sub-machine guns, light machine guns and a few grenade launchers, the aircraft was at its absolute maximum capacity. Troops from three gliders, including the men in Horsa 1, would capture and hold the bridge over the Caen Canal, while the troops in the other three aircraft targeted the bridge over the Orne. Although they had different objectives, both command groups would have to land in the same space: on a 500-metre-wide spit that separated the Caen Canal from the Orne River – one of the most strategically important places in Europe at that moment.

As they were ferried towards the area by Halifax bombers, a continuous high-pitched whistling sound filled each glider's interior. The sound was created by wind rushing through cracks and crevices in the fabric covering the Horsa's wooden fuselage. The noise was ►

The Horsa was the British Army's most widely used glider. It had also been used during the invasion of Sicily in July 1943.



The task of capturing the bridges was given to the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. They were colloquially known as the Ox & Bucks.

made louder by the fact that the door of the aircraft had already been opened so that everyone could quickly exit after landing. Once disconnected from the Halifax 'tug', however, hardly a sound could be heard. As the gliders descended, the Halifaxes continued on a daring bombing raid to distract the Germans from the more important operation about to take place.

Extreme dive was part of the landing

Immediately after detaching from its tug, Horsa 1 dived. The aim was to drop past the anti-aircraft shells being fired at the bombers to a low altitude so the glider could prepare to land. If the Horsa approached at too high an altitude, the pilot would have to circle a few times, increasing the risk of being shot at. In addition, it was hoped that when the glider dived, any Germans who spotted it would assume it was a bomber that had been hit and was about to crash.

Wallwork began his final manoeuvres as Horsa 1 dropped towards its target – a triangular area 500 metres long with its apex near the south-eastern end of the bridge. The pilots could see the German searchlights and anti-aircraft flak explosions in the air over Caen, where the Halifax bombers were distracting the defenders. Until now, there had been poor visibility of the landing area, but now the clouds dispersed and Wallwork saw for the first time the focus of all his training over the past months:

"I could see it all, the river and the canal like strips of silver in the moonlight."

To his relief, Wallwork realised that his approach to the landing area was just right. The glider was coming in faster than expected at 150 km/h, so Wallwork ordered co-pilot John Ainsworth to deploy the plane's parachute to slow down the seven-tonne, 20-metre-long craft as they landed. Ainsworth nervously pressed the release button above his head. Deploying the parachute hadn't been properly tested, but the

commander of D-Company, Major John Howard, had refused to lighten the glider's load by more than the two men that had to be discarded. He hadn't wanted to leave even the tiniest amount of ammunition behind, so the parachute was now necessary. Wallwork recalled the effect it had on their landing:

"[The parachute] lifted the tail and forced the nose down. It drew us back and knocked the speed down tremendously ... We got right into the corner of the field, the nose wheel had gone. The cockpit collapsed, and Ainsworth and I went right through the cockpit. I went over head first and landed flat on my stomach. I was stunned, as was Ainsworth; I came around and he seemed to be in bad shape. I said, 'Can you crawl?' and he said, 'No,' and then I asked if I lifted, could he crawl out and he said, 'I'll try.' I lifted the thing and I felt that I lifted the whole bloody glider when probably all I lifted was a small spar, but I felt like 30 men when I picked this thing up and he did manage to crawl out."

One minute earlier, at 00.15, Jim Wallwork had shouted the command "link arms" and the soldiers had linked with each other under their arms and raised their legs to minimise the risk of injury during the expected hard landing on the ground.

One of the soldiers who experienced Horsa 1's landing first-hand was Private Denis Edwards:

"We all held tight and braced ourselves for touchdown. There was the usual slight bump, a small jerk and a much heavier thump, as the glider made contact with the ground, but only for a moment. It jerked again, shuddered, left the ground for a second or two, bumped over the rough surface and lurched forward like a bucking bronco. We sped forward, bouncing up and down on our hard wooden seats."

"The darkness suddenly filled with a stream of brilliant sparks as the glider lost its wheels and the skid hit some stony ground. There followed a sound like a giant canvas sheet being viciously ripped apart, then a mighty crash like a clap of thunder and my body seemed to be moving in several directions at once. Moments later the crippled glider skidded and bounced over the uneven ground to slide finally to a juddering halt."

Soldiers smashed their way out

The silence right after landing was a huge contrast to the bang the men had just experienced. All that could be heard was the muffled sound of soldiers straining. No one spoke, no one moved. Then the cry of "out, everybody out" was heard and the soldiers were pulled from their reverie, grabbing their weapons – including Denis Edwards:

"The exit door had been right beside my seat. Now there was only a mass of twisted wood and fabric across the doorway and we had to use the ▶"

181 elite British soldiers captured D-Day's most important bridges

Caen
FRANCE



Between the British landing beaches and the strategically important city of Caen lay two bridges over the Caen Canal and the River Orne. The two bridges were a key transport route, both from the beaches invaded by the Allies on D-Day, and for German reinforcements coming from as far east as Paris. If the Allies could capture and hold the bridges, German reinforcements would have to take a longer route south of Caen, exposing them to Allied aerial bombardment. It was therefore of paramount importance to capture the two bridges and stop any German attempt to

regain them. If the mission failed, the British risked meeting such fierce resistance that they would be pushed back into the Channel before they could send enough troops and equipment ashore. Before the attack, the Gondrée couple, who owned a café by the two bridges, had to service the Germans during the occupation, but they also provided the resistance movement with important information about German defence positions and forces on the bridges. The information proved vital, and the couple's café later became known as the first building to be liberated on D-Day.



The Horsa gliders were towed close to the landing site by Halifax bombers.

4 Germans fooled

During the German counter-attack later in the day, Sergeant MC 'Waggar' Thornton disables a German tank with a mortar. The tank's destruction means that the Germans believe the British are much more heavily armed than they are, so abandon their attempts to recapture the bridges.

1 Pegasus captured

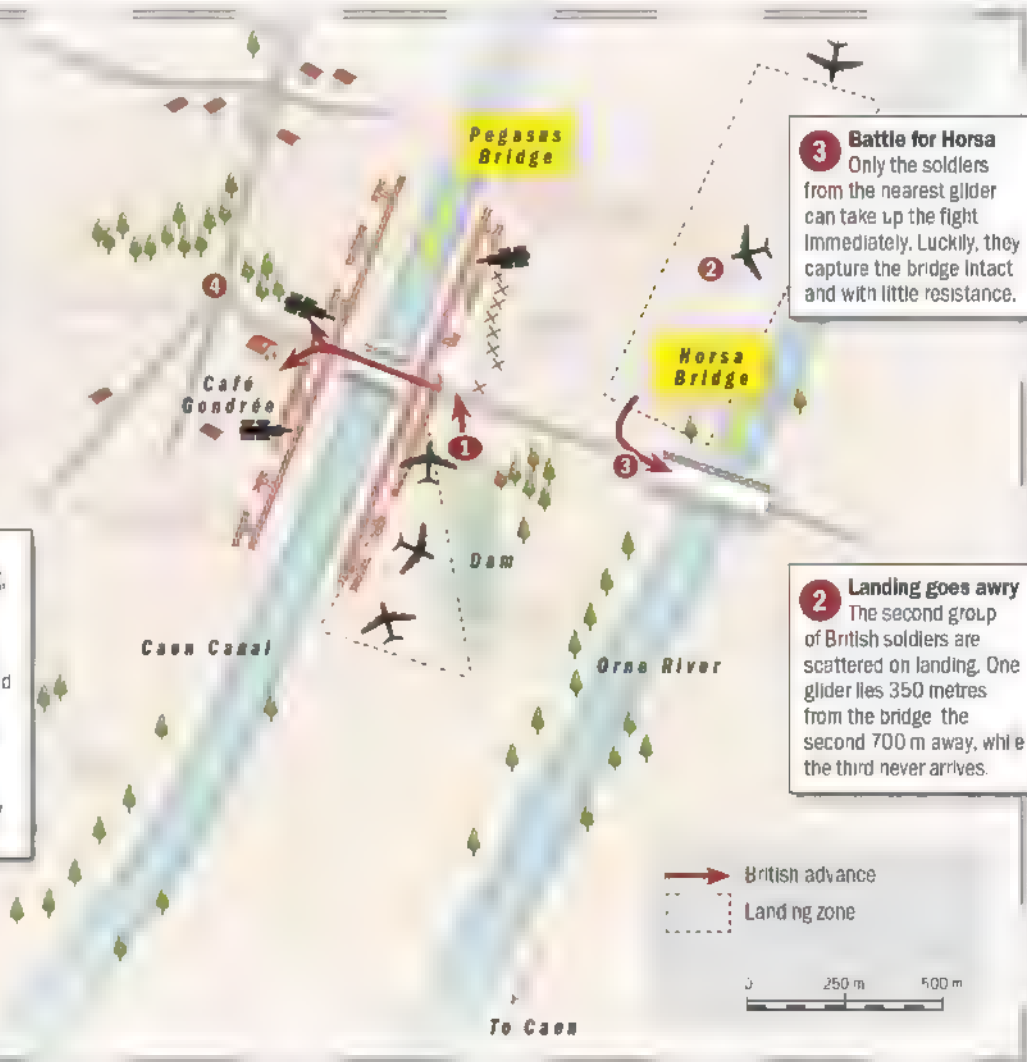
Despite a hard landing, the first glider manages to halt a few metres from the bridge over the Caen Canal. The next two gliders then land within the landing area. Shortly afterwards, the first British soldiers charge towards the German positions, which they quickly capture. Pegasus is secured.

3 Battle for Horsa

Only the soldiers from the nearest glider can take up the fight immediately. Luckily, they capture the bridge intact and with little resistance.

2 Landing goes awry

The second group of British soldiers are scattered on landing. One glider lies 350 metres from the bridge, the second 700 m away, while the third never arrives.



The British built more than 3,000 Horsa aircraft during the war. The glider was large and reliable, and ended up being used by the Americans as well.

butts of our rifles to smash our way out ... I glanced around from beneath the glider's tilted wing and saw the canal bridge's massive steel superstructure towering above me. The pilots had done a fantastic job in bringing the slithering, bouncing and crippled glider to a halt with its nose buried into the canal bank and within 75 yards of the bridge.

"As I moved forward I glanced back towards the glider and saw that the entire front had been smashed inwards almost back to the wing."

Luckily, everyone on board had survived the landing, and some soldiers exited through the smashed nose instead of using the door. At this point, as the

soldiers sprinted towards the bridge, the defenders, who were mainly Eastern Europeans conscripted into German service, realised what had happened.

Seventeen-year-old Helmut Römer was one of the sentries patrolling the 58-metre bridge over the Caen Canal. It was fortified with machine guns and an anti-tank gun, but was unmanned that night. At first, Römer thought the noise had come from the aeroplane they'd seen coming in at low altitude parallel to the canal and that the bang meant the plane had crashed.

The sentries debated whether to wake their sleeping sergeant. *"Then some soldiers, their faces smeared all in black, started coming towards us and in the*



00.07

The Halifax tugs reach the Normandy coast and release the six Horsa gliders taking part in the mission.

00.16

Nine minutes later, Staff Sergeant Jim Wallwork pilots the first glider to land on the isthmus between the two bridges.

00.21

After only five minutes of fighting, German resistance is defeated, and the bridges are taken.

half moonlight we saw they were British. In a split second, we realised what the story was," he later recalled. One fired a signal flare and the other yelled "Parachutists!" before they both fled. "[My friend] Sauer, I and our Polish comrade decided to leg it and we threw ourselves into an elderberry bush," Römer admitted

The sergeant dutifully emerged sleepily from his pillbox only to be shot by the advancing paratroopers, who quickly disabled the machine gun posts with hand grenades. Römer and his two comrades remained in hiding for over 24 hours, drinking water from the canal. Eventually, however, the young men

decided to surrender: *"Thirty six hours had passed and we were exhausted," Römer recalled. "We made the decision to hand ourselves over to the British, thinking, 'Either they will shoot us or they'll take us prisoner.'"*

Officer drowned in a pond

The two gliders accompanying Horsa 1, each with almost 30 soldiers in each, landed shortly after. Horsa 2 landed almost perfectly, but Horsa 3 landed in a pond that hadn't been recorded on the available maps. Both of Horsa 3's pilots were catapulted into the water, still strapped to their seats. As the dazed ▶





AIRSPPEED HORSA AS.51 GLIDER

Troop carrier

Glider was built from balsa wood

The British glider was largely made from wood and could best be compared to a giant model aeroplane. The glider was cheap to produce and also lightweight, which increased its glide time and manoeuvrability.

The Horsa glider, nicknamed the 'Hearse' by some soldiers with gallows humour, was a simple aircraft without an engine, built in three sections and bolted together. The front section was the cockpit. The centre section had a door and space for troops and equipment. The rear section was the tail rotor and had a door on the opposite side from the centre section. This enabled soldiers to exit whether the aircraft

had landed level or been tipped over on either side. The tail section could also be released after landing to ensure that troops and equipment could quickly exit. Both the wings and large parts of the skeleton were made from balsa wood, a very lightweight wood also used for model aeroplanes. The Horsa was dubbed "the most wooden aircraft ever built" by military engineers, and even the cockpit

instruments were made of wood to reduce its weight and enable the plane to fly for longer. At the same time, the aircraft was equipped with large flaps on the wings, which enabled it to fly in for steep-angle landings in tight spaces. The final mission for the Horsa was Operation Varsity in March 1945, where 440 gliders ferried soldiers from the 6th Airborne Division across the Rhine.

MASS-PRODUCED: The Horsa Airspeed went into production in 1941. A total of 3 655 units were built.

30 MEN OR A JEEP: The glider had room for exactly 30 soldiers. Alternatively, it could carry a jeep or even an anti-tank gun inside.

SLOW AND STEADY: The aircraft had no engine and could only glide. When pulled by other aircraft, they were only allowed to fly at a maximum of 240 km/h. Faster speeds would rip the Horsa's frame to pieces.

pilots crawled out of the pond, they spotted the body of Lance Corporal Fred Greenhalgh, presumably knocked unconscious and thrown out on landing before drowning in the pond. He became the first Allied soldier to lose his life on D-Day. In addition, 1st Platoon commander Lieutenant Herbert Denham 'Den' Broderidge died when he was the first from Horsa 1 to storm the bridge, throwing a hand grenade that destroyed a machine-gun post. During the heroic mission, he was shot in the neck and died shortly afterwards. However, the Germans were defeated in minutes with small arms and hand grenades.

As the British had anticipated, the Germans had explosive charges ready to destroy the bridge. However, contrary to expectations, the charges hadn't already been mounted on the bridge itself but were

stored in a nearby building. The Pegasus Bridge had been secured.

At the bridge over the Orne, landings were less precise than at the bridge over the Caen Canal. Only one of the gliders landed where it was supposed to. The second landed over half a kilometre from its target. The third glider was nowhere to be seen, and no one could make radio contact with it. Nevertheless, the soldiers from the first aircraft managed to capture the bridge almost without a fight. Two mortar shells were enough to put the Germans at the machine-gun position to flight. At 00.21, five minutes after the first aircraft landed, both bridges had been taken and an unknown number of German soldiers had been killed, the rest having fled. Later, it turned out that the third glider, targeting the Orne River, had landed almost

10 km away at a bridge over the Dives River. When the platoon realised their mistake, they blew up the bridge before creeping off towards the planned rendezvous.

After the bridges' capture, the special forces sent the signal indicating both were in Allied hands and undamaged. The signal – "ham and jam" – was sent over the agreed frequency, but no one answered. For an hour, the increasingly irritated radio operator at the Caen Canal repeated "ham and jam" repeatedly, but to no avail. Until the British could be relieved, they would have to prepare for a German counter attack. The question would be whether reinforcements in the form of the more heavily armed paratroopers and infantry with anti-tank guns would arrive in time

Germans weren't expecting attack

On the night of the British attack, 32-year-old German Major Hans von Luck sat in his command post, a sparsely furnished house in the village of Bellengreville, east of Caen, studying maps of the area. He was planning exercises for his command, the 125th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, but felt a restlessness in his body. In the past, von Luck had participated in the invasion of Poland and fought on the Eastern Front and in North Africa. Now there was little to do but wait for the Allied invasion, which he believed was coming soon. Not on this night, however. Von Luck later described the situation:

"The general weather conditions ... gave the 'all clear' for 5th and 6th June. So we did not anticipate any landings, for heavy seas, storms and low lying clouds would make large-scale operations at sea and in the air impossible for our opponents. That evening, I felt our lot was highly unsatisfactory; like most of my men, I was used to mobile actions, such as we had fought in the other theatres of war; this waiting for an invasion that was undoubtedly coming was enervating. But, in spite of the inactivity, morale among the troops remained high, the more so since Normandy spoiled us with butter, cheese, crème fraîche and meat, as well as cider."

On the evening of 5th June, von Luck had sent his regiment's II Battalion out on an exercise and sat waiting for a notification that the exercise has been completed. But around midnight, something else began to attract the major's attention:

"About midnight, I heard the growing roar of aircraft, which passed over us. I wondered whether the attack was destined once again for traffic routes inland or for Germany herself. The machines appeared to be

flying very low – because of the weather? I looked out the window and was wide awake; flares were hanging in the sky. At the same moment, my adjutant was on the telephone, 'Major, paratroops are dropping. Gliders are landing in our section. I'm trying to make contact with II Battalion. I'll come along to you at once.' I gave orders without hesitation, 'All units are to be put on alert immediately and the division informed. II Battalion is to go into action wherever necessary. Prisoners are to be taken if possible and brought to me.'"

Von Luck was frustrated – he couldn't launch a massive counter-attack now, minutes after the gliders had landed. Only Hitler could authorise an attack with armoured forces, but the Führer was asleep and no one seemed willing to wake him. The lack of orders from above left von Luck pacing back and forth. What he wouldn't realise until many years later was that a general directive had actually been issued to counter attack in the event of an attack by enemy airborne forces. Exactly the situation he found himself in.

However, neither von Luck nor his adjutant were informed of this directive on the night between 5th and 6th June 1944. When von Luck wrote his biography 45 years later, he was still upset about the revelation:

"The fact that in the critical hours it was left to incompletely informed divisional commanders to cope with the situation seems to me, in retrospect, inexcusable."

Despite the lack of orders from above, von Luck dared to defy protocol in a small way by ordering a small-scale counter-attack. He wanted to win back ▶

FACTS

The Caen Canal, captured by the British, is a waterway 14 km long that connects Normandy's largest city, Caen, to the English Channel. German boats patrol the canal in 1944.

The Ox & Bucks were involved all the way from D-Day across the Ardennes to the Rhine. At the end of the war, they were sent to track down and capture German scientists.



the lost bridges. The closest was the bridge over the canal, which would then open the road to the bridge over the Orne River.

Transport planes filled the sky

At 00.50, the Allied troops at the canal bridge heard an unpleasant sound. German tanks were approaching, just a few hundred metres from the bridge. Unaware of the intricate German chain of command frustrating Hans von Luck, the British feared a major attack with armoured vehicles. With the few anti tank weapons the British had at their disposal, they stood no chance against an aggressive attack if reinforcements didn't arrive soon. John Howard, leading the British at the bridge, knew reinforcements were near, however. He could hear the planes carrying paratroopers to Normandy and knew that thousands of British soldiers were being dropped east and west of the bridges during these hours. But even the Germans could see the massive waves of transport planes and bombers rolling across the sky, switching on the searchlights set up in Normandy's many villages.

"There was a bit of firing as they [paratroopers] came down. It was an inspiring sight and above all

it meant that we were not alone," Howard later recounted of the sight, which offered a glimmer of hope.

He brought out a whistle and blew a signal, over and over again. Its Morse code cut through the night – three short whistles followed by one long one: 'V' for Victory. He kept going as the signal helped paratroopers find their way to the bridge to reinforce the defences.

"For years later, paras told me what a wonderful thing it was, those whistle blasts ... Paras who had landed in a tree or a bog, in a farmyard and away from their own friends could hear that whistle. It not only meant that the bridges had been captured, but it also gave them an orientation."

Even so, as Howard whistled the Victory signal, he knew it would most likely be an hour before paratroopers arrived in any significant numbers. Most soldiers had landed around Ranville to the east to cover that flank. To the west lay plenty of German troops, and Howard and his men could soon not only hear but also see the dreaded German tanks.

"It wasn't long before we could see a couple of them about 25 yards apart moving very, very slowly. They obviously did not know what to

British troops were scheduled to reach Caen on D-Day but met fierce German resistance. They wouldn't capture the city until more than a month later.



It wasn't long before we could see a couple of [tanks] about 25 yards apart moving very, very slowly. ■ Major John Howard on the German counter-attack on the Pegasus Bridge.

expect when they got down to the bridges," he later recounted.

Howard knew that if the British lost the canal bridge, the German tanks would likely also recapture the bridge over the Orne, and once the Germans established defences around the bridges, they'd be difficult to retake. At the same time, Howard's men and the recently arrived paratroopers risked being surrounded – assuming they were still alive by that point. The major would therefore have to rely on the anti-tank weapons his men possessed. The PIAT (The Projector, Infantry, Anti Tank) was a grenade launcher that had to be fired from a short distance to hit and stop a tank.

As the two tanks approached, Howard ordered Sergeant MC 'Wagger' Thornton to take aim at the tanks. Thornton was trained in the use of a PIAT and knew exactly how to fire it. Years later, Thornton could still remember how he felt at 01.30, "shaking like a bloody leaf", but ready with the weapon as the first tank approached:

"Now a PIAT is a load of rubbish really. First, you're a dead loss if you have to go even 50 yards, and second you must never, never miss. If you do, you've had it, because by the time you reload the thing and cock it, which is a chore on its own, everything is gone. You're indoctrinated into your brain that you mustn't miss."

Thornton positioned himself at a T-junction where a road led down to the bridge where he believed he could fire from the shortest possible distance.

"And sure enough, in about three minutes, this bloody great thing appears. I was more hearing it than seeing it, in the dark; it was rattling away there, and it turned out to be a Mark IV [Panzer] tank coming along pretty slowly, and they hung around for a few seconds to figure out where they were. Only had two of the bombs with me. Told myself, 'You mustn't miss.' Anyhow, although I was shaking, I took an aim and bang, off it went. I hit him round about right bang in the middle. I made sure I had him right in the middle. I was so excited and so shaking I had to move back a bit."

The PIAT grenade burrowed through the armour and set off a chain reaction inside the armoured giant. Machine-gun ammunition and grenades exploded. One of the eyewitnesses was Lieutenant Dennis Fox, who took cover behind a wall.

"You couldn't go very far because whizbang a bullet or shell went straight past you, but finally it died down, and incredibly we heard this man crying out. Ole Tommy Klare couldn't stand it any longer and he went straight out up to the tank and it was blazing away and he found the driver had got out of the tank still conscious, was laying beside it, but both legs were gone. He had been hit in the knees getting out, and Klare, who was always kind, he was an immensely strong fellow

... hunched this poor old German on his back and took him to the first aid post. I thought it was useless of course, but, in fact, I believe the man lived," Fox said afterwards.

Unfortunately, the tank driver only survived for a few hours after the PIAT attack.

Germans established line of defence

The multiple explosions in the tank left the Germans believing they were up against much stronger resistance than actually existed. The second tank decided to withdraw, its crew reporting that the British had powerful anti-tank weapons. However, at 03.00, German units tried again. Armed with automatic weapons and grenade launchers, they attacked Major Howard's force, which had moved into the nearby town of Bénouville. They managed to push the British back slightly to the centre of the town. There, the Germans established a defensive line, where they waited for their armoured units to finish the job and retake the two bridges.

But as the day began to dawn, Major von Luck was still waiting for the order to counter-attack with his panzer regiment. Meanwhile, the invasion had begun on the beaches of Normandy, where 156,000 Allied soldiers would land during the day, supported by nearly 5,000 aircraft. By 07.00, Howard's men could see shells from Allied naval vessels flying over the bridges towards Caen.

The advantage of darkness that Hans von Luck had hoped for had gone. He knew that when his tanks, which were currently hidden under camouflage, started moving, Allied reconnaissance aircraft would immediately spot them and direct naval fire on them.

Germans attacked by air and water

At 10.00, events started moving again. A German fighter bomber swept in just above the trees along ▶

OX & BUCKS (1881-1958)

The regiment that captured the two bridges was formed in 1881 and was based in Oxford. It fought in Burma in the late 1800s, was sent to Ireland and took part in the Boer War. During World War I, the regiment fought on the Western Front, in Italy and in the Middle East. When WWII broke out, it was sent to France and was later evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940.



He was a real stinker, ranting on in English about what a stupid thing it was for us to think of invading the Continent. ■ John Howard on the young German who ran aground in the Caen Canal.

the canal and dropped its bomb. The bridge had to be destroyed to slow the Allied advance, but despite scoring a direct hit, the bomb failed to detonate. The bridge also came under attack from two gunboats approaching from the north. They'd been driven further away from the sea and into the Caen Canal by the coastal invasion. One of them sailed at high speed towards the bridge, firing a 20 mm cannon. The boat was disabled by another shot from a PIAT. As the other boat fled, the damaged boat struck the shore and several Germans surrendered without complaint. The captain was not one of them. Howard judged him to be 18 or 19 years old, and a fanatical Nazi.

"He was a real stinker, ranting on in English about what a stupid thing it was for us to think of invading the Continent, and when his Führer got to hear about it we would be driven back into the sea, and making the most insulting remarks, and I had the greatest difficulty stopping my chaps from getting hold and lynching that bastard on the spot."

John Howard immediately arranged for the German to be taken away for questioning.

Other German attempts to destroy the bridges also ended in failure, such as two frogmen who were sent into the water. They were to swim to the bridge and blow it up, but in daylight were quickly spotted and shot by infantry along the canal. It wasn't until a

little after noon that von Luck's regiment and the rest of the division were given the green light to go into action with their panzer forces.

"Finally General Marcks, whether authorised to do so or not, ordered our division to attack at once, with the whole division, east of the Orne and smash the units of the 6th Airborne Division that had landed there and cut their communications with the west," von Luck later wrote about the counter attack.

His II Battalion would have to recapture both bridges and then establish contact with other units on the English Channel. Hans von Luck was ordered to launch the attack as soon as possible, and would receive artillery support, according to his superiors' orders. As von Luck predicted, his tanks immediately came under heavy fire from Allied ships in the English Channel and from the air, where the Allies already had a massive advantage. Even so, the British defenders begin to feel the pressure. Reinforcements had been due to arrive at noon, and now it was 13.00. They could repel sporadic attacks, but not a concentrated attack from the panzer forces. It was with an enormous sense of relief when Platoon Commander Tod Sweeney suddenly elbowed fellow lieutenant Dennis Fox in the ribs.

"Listen," he said. *"I can hear bagpipes."*

"Oh, don't be stupid, Tod, we're in the middle of France, you can't hear bagpipes," Fox replied.

But the sound of the bagpipes was growing louder.

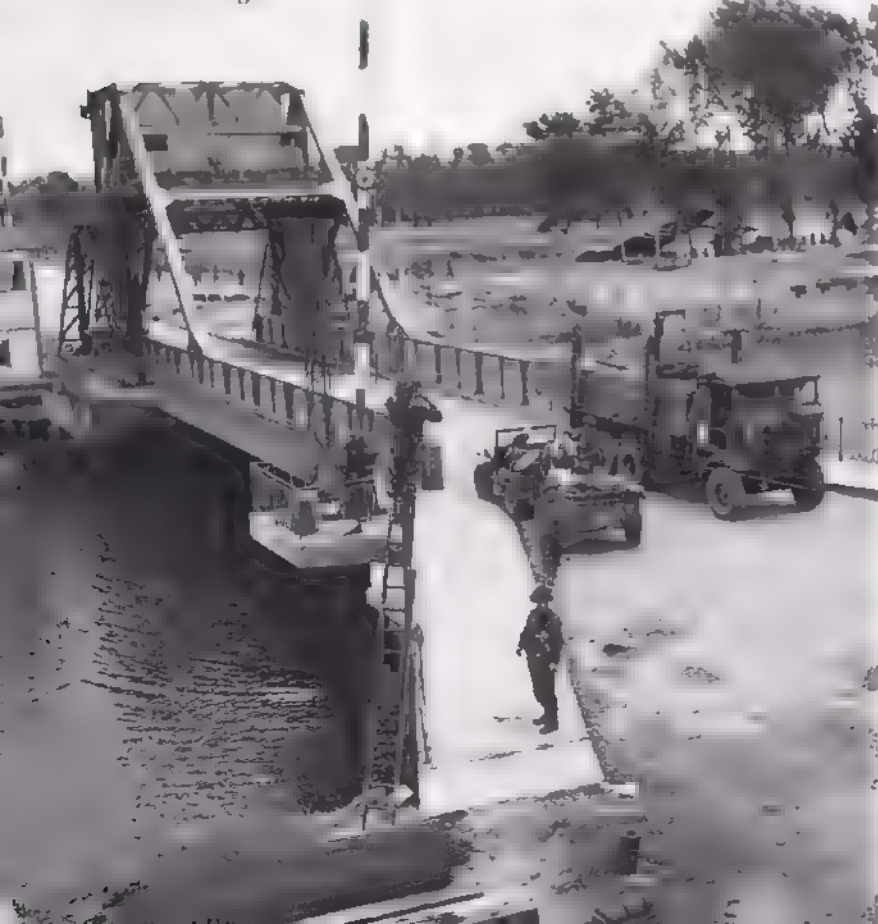
Time for secret champagne

And then they appeared: the commandos of the 1st Special Service Brigade, including bagpipers, who had reached the bridges after earlier landing on the coast. They were accompanied by a Churchill tank. Sergeant Thornton saw the relief on his comrades' faces and remembered it when he recounted the long-awaited help many years later:

"Everybody threw their rifles down, and kissing and hugging each other, and I've seen men with tears rolling down their cheeks. I did honestly probably I was the same. Oh, dear, celebrations I shall never forget."

More Allied tanks arrived to establish a defensive line in Bénouville. Others continued eastwards to take on the German 21st Panzer Division. By the early evening of 6th June, the situation was stabilising. Major Nigel Taylor, who had a large open wound in his thigh, was carried down to Café Gondrée by the bridge over the canal. There he was served a glass of champagne. The hosts, Georges and Thérèse Gondrée, who'd taken shelter in the cellar with their children during the fighting, had buried 98 bottles in the garden during the German occupation in June 1940. What the Germans, who were frequent visitors to the café, didn't realise was that Thérèse

The Pegasus Bridge never fell back into German hands. In the background are the three gliders and the Isthmus between the bridges.



Bridges played a crucial role

When the German army tried to fight back in the days after D-Day, the loss of the bridges proved crucial. Their panzer divisions had to take a large detour to go around them and were slowed by fierce resistance and air attacks.

On D Day itself, the capture of the two bridges at the Caen Canal and the Orne River meant that the paratroopers of the 6th Airborne Division landing east of the Orne River were assured of supplies and reinforcements from the Sword Beach landing. Had Sergeant MC 'Wagger' Thornton not hit the mark with his PIAT mortar as he lay in wait for the first German tanks on the western side of the Caen Canal, the

bridges would most likely have fallen back into German hands. The loss of the bridges would have isolated the 6th Airborne Division against a well-armed German force, resulting in heavy casualties. The capture of the bridges was also significant in the longer term. The panzer forces that Hitler sent to the rescue from the east, including Calais, had to take a detour before they could take on the invasion force. Unable to

use the two bridges, the German tanks had to drive south of the bombed-out Caen, and when they headed north again, they ran head-on into fierce British resistance. In the coming weeks of fighting, the Germans lost a large number of their armoured vehicles. However, the German resistance was strong enough to thwart the Allied plan to take Caen on D-Day. That would take another six weeks.

British troops in the streets of Caen. The city was bombed to smithereens and until it was captured, the outcome of the invasion remained uncertain.



Gondrée could speak German and had passed on information to the resistance movement. Now the long-awaited invasion had arrived, and this was the perfect opportunity to pour a glass for the wounded British major.

"It was a beautiful evening," Taylor recalled many years later. "And Georges Gondrée brought me a glass of champagne, which was very welcome indeed after that sort of day, I can tell you. And then that evening, just before it got dark, there was a tremendous flight of aircraft, hundreds of British aircraft. They came in and they did a glider drop and a supply drop between the bridges and

the coast on our side of the canal. It was a marvellous sight ... And then it seemed only a very few minutes afterwards that all these chaps in jeeps, towing anti tank guns and God knows what, were coming down the road through Le Port, and over this bridge ... I can remember thinking to myself, 'My God, we've done it!'"

The Brits had played their part and even held the bridges. But for the Germans, the battle wasn't yet over. The area near Caen along with the two bridges was of great strategic importance, and during those hours, three German armoured divisions were preparing to counter-attack. ■



Seven thousand paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division landed in Normandy on D-Day. The soldiers were tasked with preventing German counter-attacks on the American beachheads. The soldiers would land on Omaha and Utah Beaches a few hours later.

Night of 6th June 1944

FOLLOWING THE 101ST AIRBORNE

The grenade went off
it. I was yelling at him
to 'Move, for Christ's
sake, move!'

Following the 101st Airborne

Under heavy fire, around 7,000 paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division were the first Americans to land on French soil on D-Day. Using the night as cover, they were dropped in scattered clusters over Normandy and fought their way through the dark to capture key positions and pave the way for the Allied invasion.

By Lisa Branson

Cold air filled the cabin as a soldier opened the heavy flight door of the C-47 transport plane in the airspace over Normandy shortly after midnight. The fresh air made the soldiers in the cabin sit up straight in their seats. Most of them had dozed off during the two-hour flight over England and the Channel, exhausted from exertion and drowsy from the airsickness tablets the officers had given them before take-off. Some lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply as they watched a red light switch on and illuminate the cabin. When the light turned green four minutes later, it would be time for action. Then, one by one, the men would plunge into the cold, dark airspace over Normandy – the first Americans to take part in D-Day, 6th June 1944.

The paratroopers belonged to the so-called pathfinders of the 101st Airborne Division and formed the vanguard of the parachute operation over Normandy. They were leading the way for the Allied pilots who would fly towards the Normandy coast shortly after and drop thousands of other US paratroopers over France. The aerial invasion would ensure control of strategically important targets such as bridges, locks and transport hubs, and the troops would capture German gun positions that could threaten the Allied landings, which were scheduled to begin a few hours later.

The paratroopers would not only secure the strategic hubs, but were crucial to the success of the landing of the US soldiers who would arrive on the invasion beach code-named Utah. The beach was located on the south-eastern part of the French Cotentin Peninsula, and a total of 14,000 paratroopers would be dropped on the peninsula in the early hours

of the night before D Day began. The soldiers were scheduled to land in six oval drop zones about 2.5 kilometres long and 800 metres wide. The 101st Airborne, to which the pathfinders in the plane belonged, would land in three zones called A, C and D. The other US division, the 82nd Airborne, would be dropped in three other zones further away from the invasion beaches.

From their drop zones, the men would have to fight their way to their targets in darkness and unfamiliar terrain, a task that was absolutely necessary to accomplish. The success of the invasion depended on the Germans' defences being weakened – and if the landing on the beaches failed a few hours later, the paratroopers would be at the mercy of an unknown fate, isolated and alone on the French mainland, facing German superiority.

On the maps at Allied headquarters, the oval landing zones were easily recognisable, but the reality on the ground was very different. The peninsula's landscape consisted of hedgerows and small clusters of trees, but was otherwise flat, monotonous and featureless. In even the brightest moonlight, it was impossible for pilots to identify the zones based on ground observation alone. The planes also had to fly in close formation, almost wing tip to wing tip, and the pilot had very little time to observe the terrain if he was to maintain formation and avoid collision with other aircraft. Heavy enemy fire would further complicate an accurate drop under these conditions, according to army commanders before D-Day.

The pilots needed a vanguard of pathfinders to guide them with signals from the ground. The brains behind the invasion decided to send a group of elite soldiers in advance. They would create recognisable landmarks on the ground. The specially trained corps of soldiers from the airborne divisions would locate and mark the drop zones so that the pilots of the following planes could find them more easily.

Pilots won a trip to London

As evening fell on 5th June, 20 C-47 planes began warming up their engines at their base in North Witham in southern England. The aircraft would take the pathfinders across the Channel. Seated in each plane was a team of 18: two officers, 12 men to carry and operate the equipment, and four heavily armed soldiers to provide cover for the others. Prior to



The 101st's emblem was a bald eagle. It was called Old Abe after Abraham Lincoln.

Pathfinders wore a special emblem on their sleeves that symbolised guidance.



the mission, the pilots and first officers had undergone intensive training at a specialised flight school. Each day, the crew flew three missions and underwent exercises that involved dropping dummies over drop zones similar to those they would hit in Normandy. The crew that hit closest to the zone's centre marker received a cash prize and a 48-hour pass to London. Each pilot also had to complete at least one jump to put themselves in the soldiers' shoes.

Their mission was top secret, which was why the pathfinders were kept isolated in a camp of tents surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by military police armed with machine guns.

"The only comparable sensation would be those last five days in the death house, when everybody is quiet and considerate, and they feed you well and let you sleep late and write letters, and give you little favours and comforts," wrote one pathfinder.

As the clock approached 22.00, the first C-47 was waved off the runway. Heavily loaded with men and equipment, the plane climbed slowly. The dark green fuselage didn't even have time to blend in with the evening sky before two others followed. In close formation, the pilots headed south, towards Normandy. The rest of the aircraft followed.

In the English Channel, green lights and radio signals sent from two Royal Navy patrol boats pointed

the aircraft in the right direction. The markings of the last boat told the pilot that it was time to make a sharp left turn, and Normandy was now 96 kilometres straight ahead. Among the pilots was 21-year-old David Hamilton, who remembered the flight from North Whitham many years later:

"We flew over [the Channel] at 50 feet over the water to get below the radar. When we hit the coast of France by making a turn, we lifted up and there ahead of us was a cloud bank. The planes that were ahead of us couldn't report back, couldn't break radio silence. So we had to deal with that. [My navigator] said: 'Don't move, we're perfect.' So, I pulled down to the bottom of the cloud bank, broke out, gave them the green light, out they went."

Only an hour after the vanguard, the rest of the 101st Airborne took off. Until they arrived, the 200 or so pathfinders would be all alone in enemy territory.

Islands were Germany's fortress

Not all the pathfinders escaped the trip unscathed. Radio silence was not enough to avoid German attention and firepower, as pilot Harold Sperber realised:

"[We flew] at a very low altitude and maintaining radio silence. As darkness approached, the only lights on the aircraft were four small blue lights on the surface of each ▶

Dwight D Eisenhower sent the war-painted paratroopers of the 101st off with the words: "Full victory – nothing else."



wing and the top of the fuselage, and a faint glow from flame suppressors on the engine exhausts. Shortly after passing the islands of Jersey and Guernsey, all hell broke loose. There was an explosion in the left engine, probably caused by anti-aircraft fire from Alderney."

During the war, the Channel Islands were occupied by Nazi Germany, who used forced labour to fortify them as part of their line of defence to the west, the Atlantic Wall.

"Captain Clyde Taylor, the pilot, immediately feathered the left propeller and started a right turn. At that

point, I pushed the nose down to avoid a collision with [the adjacent C 47]. It was a close call.

"The C 47 was a fantastic and forgiving airplane, but it was not designed to fly on one engine with 16 fully loaded paratroopers and a crew of five. And all we had in front of us was ocean – cold, cold ocean. Suddenly we saw a ship. We passed the word to get ready to ditch, and turned away from the ship. With landing lights on, we descended and then hit the water – and I mean hit. Suddenly all I could see was bright green water."

Light switched on too soon

Harold Sperber and the paratroopers were picked up by the British naval ship HMS *Tartar* and all survived. Meanwhile, the other planes continued

Hundreds of paratroopers practise jumping and formation flying over a field in England in the months leading up to D-Day.



26/4

Plans for a glider invasion are scrapped for security reasons. Instead, soldiers will land by parachute

27/5

In mid-May, the Germans further fortify Normandy. As a result, troops' drop zones are moved around until ten days before D-Day

3/6

Shortly before D-Day, Allied aircraft are painted with black and white stripes to make them recognisable without radio contact

towards Normandy. As the pathfinders planted their boots on the ground, they had just over an hour to find and mark their landing zone. The signals consisted of powerful searchlights with a cone of light pointing upwards. As the C-47s approached, an operator on the ground used the lights to send out Morse code to mark the landing site for each drop zone. In addition, 12-kg battery powered radio transmitters indicated position and distance with a signal that could be picked up by receiving equipment on the transport aircraft.

Setting up the floodlights was done in a hurry and in pitch darkness, and the task was very difficult.

"Coming into the jump field, [the pilot] slowed the ship up so our opening shock was almost nothing. We had some trees and woods about, but our drop was almost in the centre of the field. Our job was to set lights up to guide the incoming troops in."

"As it was very dark, I had some doubts whether or not the light would work, so in enemy territory I turned my light on to see. I guess at the time it was an incredibly stupid thing [to do]," Frederick Wilhelm, who jumped from the first plane, wrote

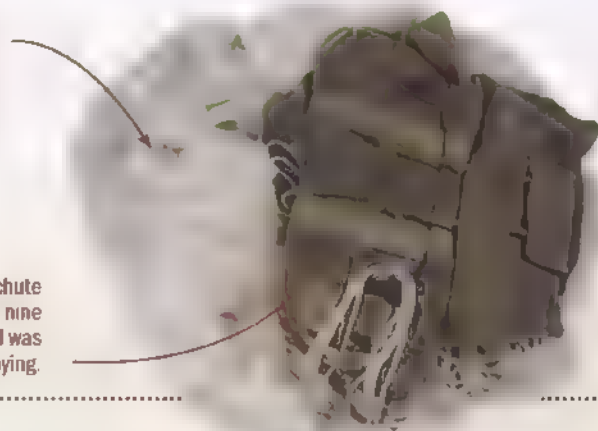
One of Wilhelm's comrades, Francis Rocca, noted

"We set up all right and succeeded not only in attracting our planes to our drop zone – but also the fire of half the German Army."

Frederick Wilhelm and Francis Rocca accomplished their mission, but it wasn't that easy for the

Parachutes were sewn from nylon during the war, after all Japanese silk imports ceased.

The T 5 parachute weighed nine kilograms and was self-deploying.



pathfinders of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment. They flew past the drop zone and the pilots only realised their mistake when they crossed the east coast of Cotentin. The aircraft turned around and managed to land the pathfinders on the second attempt. The terrain in zone D, where they were dropped, was, unlike the other five zones, empty of places to hide, and enemy forces quickly spotted the paratroopers. As a result, almost half the pathfinders in this drop zone were killed, wounded or captured. Several other pathfinders were forced to abandon their endeavours or they lost their equipment. The failures happened either because the pathfinders ▶





Pathfinders and pilots
from the 82nd Division
gathered at their
transport aircraft
before D-Day; 18 of
the men were dropped
over Normandy.

couldn't find the drop zone or more often than not – because German patrols chased the soldiers off before they could finish the job.

Despite the difficulties, every zone was equipped with at least one radio transmitter as the first swarm of C-47s filled with paratroopers from the 101st Airborne buzzed over the low, flat land of the Cotentin Peninsula. The pathfinders were no longer alone.

Plane exploded in front of soldiers

From 00.35 and for two hours, wave after wave of C-47 transport planes flew over the Cotentin Peninsula. Each wave consisted of 36 aircraft in a V formation. In one of the planes was 19-year-old Raymond Geddes from Maryland. He had become a radio operator in the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment immediately after graduating from high school. Right then, he felt proud to be one of 101st commander Maxwell Taylor's men:

"About a week before D-Day, they moved us from the town of Lamborne, where we had been stationed since arriving in England six months earlier, to Welford Airdrome, where we would remain until the start of the invasion ... We were confined in what they called a staging area until the D-Day take off. The main thing that I recall about our time in the staging area was that the chow was excellent! Sometime after our arrival, probably about 3rd June, we were taken into a large room and our mission was revealed to us ... As it turned out, we were more than a reaction force for General Taylor on D Day morning – we would be in the very front of his [mission]."

The planes hit the same cloud bank that had plagued the pilots who had just landed the pathfinders. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Young remembered how the thick grey layer confused him on approach:

"On approaching the west coast of the peninsula, there was a layer of clouds or haze that made us

think it was land. It was not apparent until it was too late to avoid it. I had to make a quick decision as to whether to try to climb up over this cloud bank or go down beneath it, and I decided to climb up over it. About 11 miles inland I found a hole through the clouds and went down on instruments again. I broke out through the cloud just past the first railroad."

The first to jump were the 101st Airborne's 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment, Young recalled:

"At 00.48 the red light came on and jumpmasters electrified into action. 'Stand up! Hook up! Check equipment! Sound off for equipment check!' Now the jumpers were tense, every man alert for the next command. 'Stand in the door!' Crowd forward, reach forward, listen, tense, excited now. Green light – 'Let's Go! Bill Lee!' With the cry of 'Bill Lee!' the 502nd hit the silk and descended like Hitler's doom on occupied France."

"Bill Lee" referred to the 502nd's former commander, General William Carey Lee, who in the years leading up to D-Day had played a crucial role in establishing the US parachute regiments. However, it soon became apparent that the invasion required more than daring and rousing battle cries. Many planes were hit by heavy artillery fire from German anti-aircraft guns and crashed burning into the sea before they could reach their destinations. The tight V formation meant that the soldiers saw the tragedies that befell their comrades. Lieutenant Charles Santarsiero watched from his aircraft as another US plane was blown apart by German anti-aircraft fire:

"The explosion shook our plane. Someone asked: 'What the hell was that?' I said one of our fighter pilots had just shot down a Kraut. They cheered! For their morale, I thought it best that way. How does one tell their men that their buddies were just blown to hell?"

For young Raymond Geddes, the flight to the drop zone was also highly dramatic:

"I looked out the window once and saw a red light down there somewhere. Then someone said, 'We are over land!' I looked out the door. It was sort of moonlit haze. Shortly thereafter the red light came on and the drill started – 'Stand up! Hook up!' Then the plane started to bounce around in a manner which I had never experienced before. We also began to hear explosions and what sounded like hail hitting the plane."

"We heard a loud explosion at the same time as a large flash of light. One of the planes in our group had gone up in a giant explosion. Someone called out, 'Look, those guys are on fire!' I leaned over and looked out the left windows and could see bits of flaming wreckage as the plane next to us also began to go down. I saw tracers from anti aircraft fire all over the sky, and I realized that the 'hail' hitting the plane was flak. Along with others I began to yell to ►

Paratroopers ended up far from target

Utah Beach

FRANCE



The mission was planned down to the last detail. Two divisions, the 101st Airborne and 82nd Airborne, would land on the left flank of the invasion beaches to cut off the Cotentin Peninsula from the rest of France. The army had designated six oval drop zones labelled A, C, D, N, O and T, with the 101st landing in the first three. Before landing, specially trained pathfinders marked the zones with lights and radio transmitters to guide the pilots on their way.

But when D-Day arrived, almost everything went wrong: lack of training, poor visibility and

a constant barrage made it almost impossible for the pilots to find their exact drop position and a large number had to turn around or signal to jump at a random location. As a result, soldiers landed up to 32 kilometres from their landing zones and spent precious time trying to find their units. One sixth of the 82nd's soldiers were dropped on the wrong side of the Merderet River. In particularly tragic cases, soldiers landed in the sea or rivers, and drowned. The primary cause of the chaos was the darkness. After D-Day, the Allies made no further attempts to land paratroopers at night.

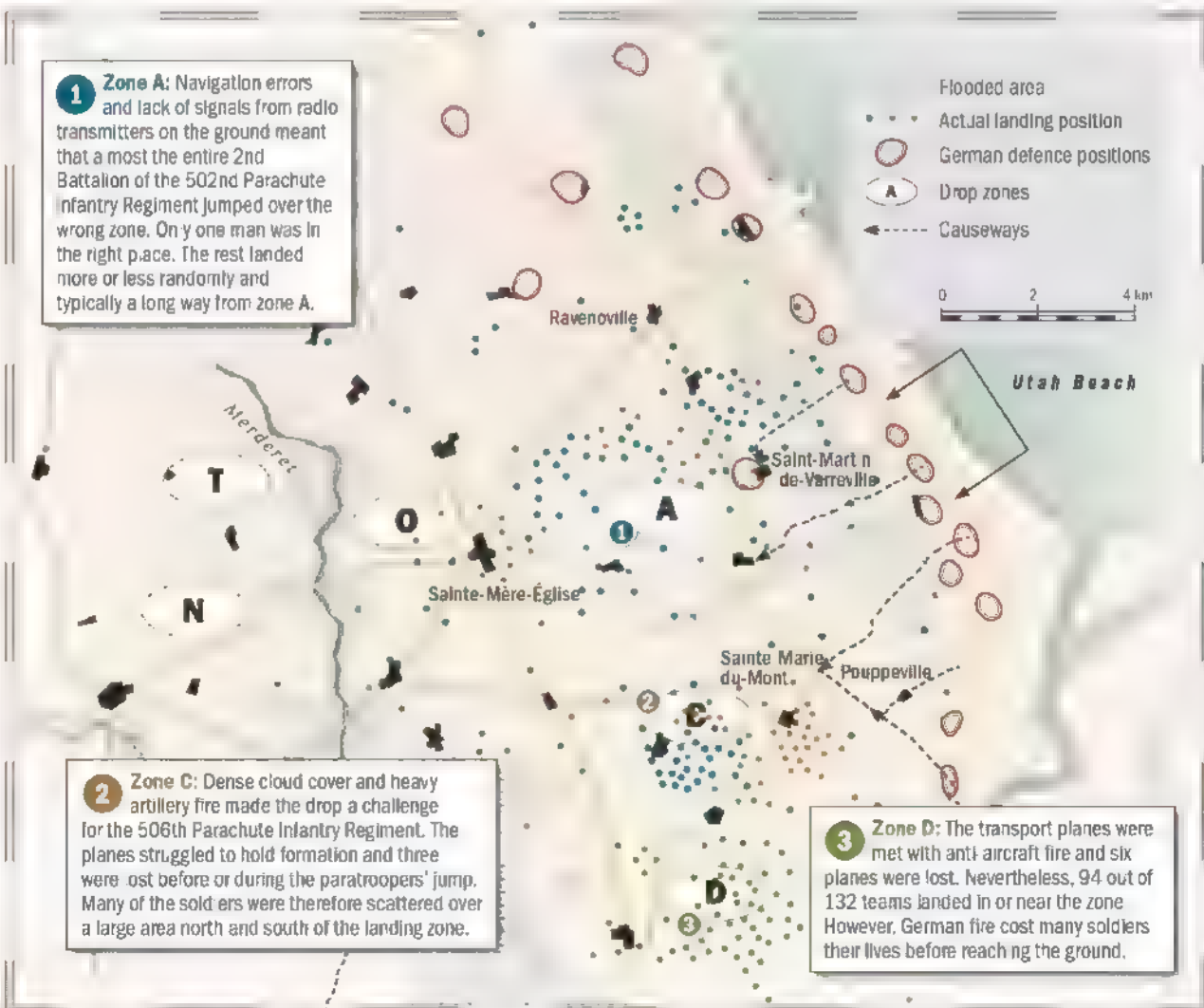


Soldiers in the Filthy 13 camouflaged themselves with war paint before D-Day.

1 Zone A: Navigation errors and lack of signals from radio transmitters on the ground meant that at most the entire 2nd Battalion of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment jumped over the wrong zone. Only one man was in the right place. The rest landed more or less randomly and typically a long way from zone A.

2 Zone C: Dense cloud cover and heavy artillery fire made the drop a challenge for the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The planes struggled to hold formation and three were lost before or during the paratroopers' jump. Many of the soldiers were therefore scattered over a large area north and south of the landing zone.

3 Zone D: The transport planes were met with anti-aircraft fire and six planes were lost. Nevertheless, 94 out of 132 teams landed in or near the zone. However, German fire cost many soldiers their lives before reaching the ground.

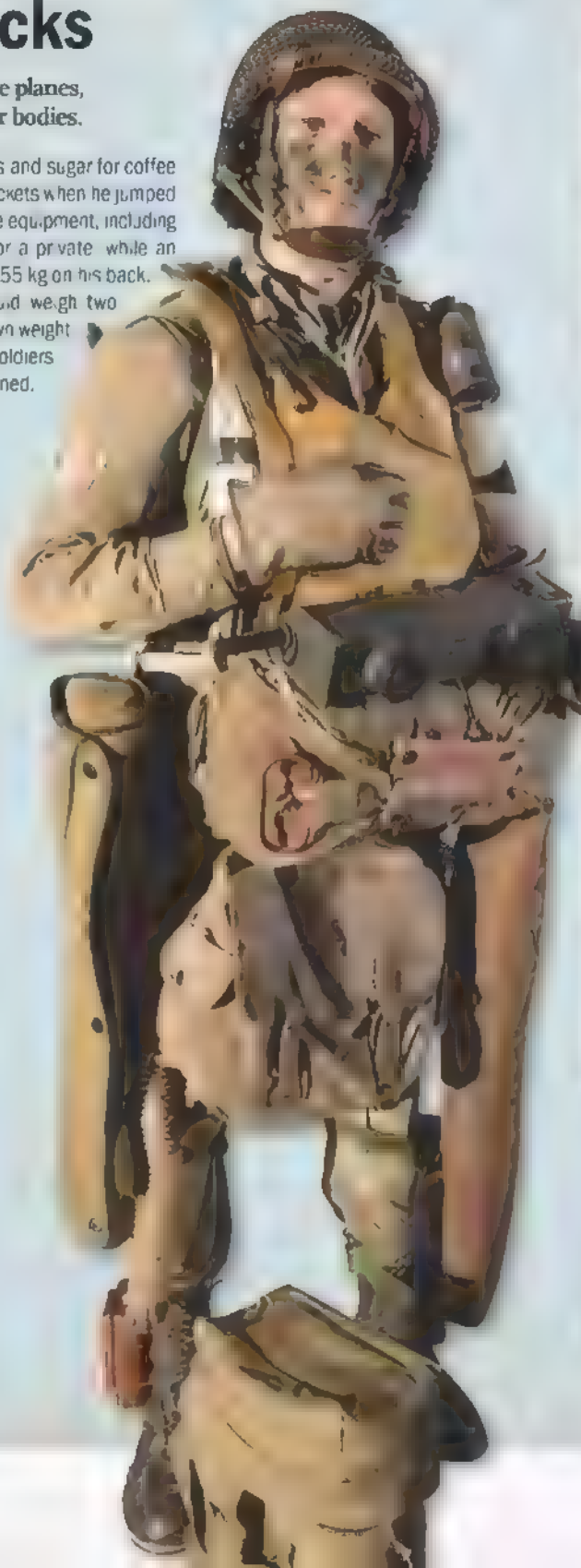




Americans jumped with 55 kg on their backs

When paratroopers boarded the planes, they carried all their kit on their bodies.

Rifle, hand grenades, stock cubes and sugar for coffee filled a paratrooper's bags and pockets when he jumped out of the plane. The total weight of the equipment, including the parachute, was around 40 kg for a private while an officer might have jumped with up to 55 kg on his back. This meant that the equipment could weigh two thirds of the combat-ready soldier's own weight. This load was the reason why many soldiers who landed in swamps and lakes drowned.



STANDARD EQUIPMENT

- A short rifle – carbine – model Garand M1A1 with a folding stock and eight cartridges
- Cartridge belt with water container
- Hand grenades
- Pocket compass
- Machete
- Emergency flares
- Notebook
- Fire-resistant helmet and gloves

EXTRA EQUIPMENT

- Medical equipment/emergency kit
- Colt .45 calibre automatic pistol
- Knife
- Approx 1 kg of explosives
- Rope for ladders and similar
- Survival kit (fire-starting equipment, a small knife, etc)
- Extremely limited number of personalised items

EMERGENCY RATIONS:

- Four pieces of chewing gum
- Two stock cubes
- Two sachets of freeze-dried Nescafé coffee with two sugars and creamer
- Four Hershey's chocolate bars
- A pack of pipe tobacco
- A bottle with tablets to purify water

The soldier carried equipment in pockets and in customised bags that could be attached to the parachute with hooks. However, a lot of equipment was ripped off in the jump.

our jump master, 'Let's get the hell out of here!' – or words to that effect. Then our plane went into a dive and we tried to keep from falling down."

The plane was approaching the ground at an alarming rate, but the pilot managed to make a timely correction before disaster struck. From then on, everything happened quickly, Geddes recalled:

"Suddenly, the green light came on. Immediately the line started out the door and we jumped. We were going fast and the opening shock was terrific! I remember seeing a farmhouse below and then I was on the ground."

Raymond Geddes and the rest of the 501st landed in the centre of drop zone C, as planned. The airborne invasion of Normandy was underway.

Dead soldiers filled the ditches

Although Geddes landed safely, the danger was far from over. The straps on his parachute backpack had tightened, so he was stuck in it, and he had lost valuable equipment during the jump:

"My harness was so tight I couldn't get myself free. Cows were all around me as I reached for the

knife attached to my boot. It was gone, pulled loose when the chute opened. I finally got hold of my jump knife, which I had stored in a pocket in my jacket, and destroyed government property by cutting myself out of the harness. I stood up and checked my radio operator's watch, which I noticed had stopped, from the opening shock, at exactly 01.25."

Geddes looked around for his comrades but saw no one. Luckily, he still had his rifle and cricket – a clicking device for sending signals.

"There was noise coming from every direction, planes overhead and shooting on the ground, but I was totally alone. Finally, in the moonlight, I saw some helmets. I gave one click on the 101st recognition signal (a toy cricket) and waited for the reply of two clicks. There was no reply. I tried again. Still no answer. I was reaching for a grenade when, thank God, I saw the shape of the helmets. I called out and found that the soldiers were men from my company. They told me they never heard the cricket."

In the hours that followed, Geddes marched towards Utah Beach almost in a daze. He was ►

FACTS

US forces were heavily reinforced in 1943. On D Day, they had

1,207

C-47 transport planes, a third of which were in reserve – and a third of which were less than a year old.

Three US paratroopers lie dead in a ditch after D-Day. They died in the battle for the town of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont.



I was shot through the right leg while dashing across a road intersection just west of Pouppeville. ■ Major Lawrence Legere on the battle for the small town of Pouppeville.

mesmerised by the bizarre beauty of the German tracer lights sweeping across the sky in search of an Allied target. During the exhausting trek, Geddes saw a plane explode.

"I also remember that I fell into a ditch and found it was full of dead soldiers – I still don't know if they were Germans or Americans. One thing I do remember is that at dawn, when I could see, I took my trusty jump knife and dropped my trousers so I could cut off those damn hot GI long johns."

In the morning, Raymond Geddes reached the village of Pouppeville. Several important roads converged there, so the Germans would not give up the town without a fight.

Sniper killed medic

The units responsible for taking Pouppeville had not arrived, so another group of 40 US soldiers were assigned to the task. When fighting broke out at 09.00, 60 German soldiers, including a sniper, were defending the town. The battle therefore took place from house to house. Along the way, Major Lawrence Legere was wounded:

"I was shot through the right leg while dashing across a road intersection just west of Pouppeville. The bullet entered just above the knee and exited the outside middle of the thigh, shattering the bone it had passed through. I was wearing a small regulation entrenching shovel from the right side of my pistol belt, and my first sensation was not one of pain, but of hearing a loud 'clang' as the bullet passed through the blade of the shovel. A few seconds after I had been shot, a little medic with red crosses prominently displayed on his arms and helmet rushed in the middle of the road and knelt down to help me."

Young medic Eddle Hohl had thrown himself into the line of fire, believing the

Geneva Conventions would protect him. Just as Hohl reached into his bag to treat Legere, he was shot. Raymond Geddes witnessed the incident:

"Legere was yelling in pain; and Hohl went right out there, as he was trained to do, wearing a big red cross on his helmet and another on his arm. The sniper fired, and Hohl just sort of did a somersault. He never said a word. I called out to him to see if he was all right, but he never answered. I hope somebody got the bastard who shot him. There was no doubt that he was shooting a medic."

Hohl was not the only victim. By midday, Pouppeville was in US hands after three hours of fierce fighting. Eighteen US paratroopers were killed or wounded during the action in and around the town, partly due to the sniper's merciless shots.

The capture of Pouppeville was an important step towards fulfilling the 101st Airborne's mission: to clear the road inland from Utah Beach. But the Germans used the power of nature against the Allies.

The Douve River runs through Normandy and into the sea, and its flow could be controlled by a lock at the town of La Barquette. Erwin Rommel, the commander of the German defences along the coast, had ordered the locks to be opened at high tide and closed at low tide, so the area was always flooded and difficult for an invasion force to pass through. The only routes from the beach to the dry land further from the coast were therefore along four narrow causeways.

Crossing the causeways was deadly. They cut through a flat, grassy wetland that offered no cover from enemy fire. At the western end of the causeways, the terrain rose to a height of 7.5 metres, giving the enemy a view of both the route and the sea beyond. The Germans had therefore placed gun batteries and machine gun nests there.

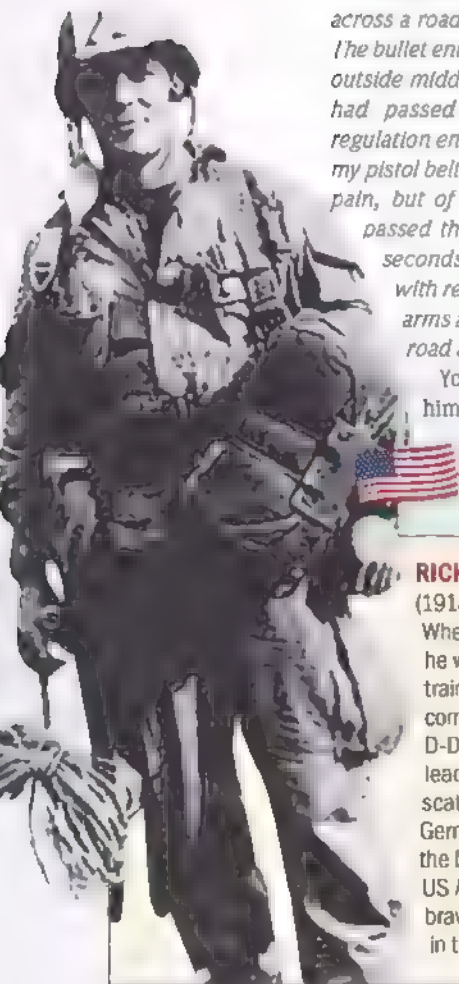
The 4th Division landed on Utah Beach in the morning and were relying on the 101st Airborne to gain control of the four heavily defended causeways and remove the German positions. If they failed, the causeways would become shooting ranges, with the Allied soldiers and vehicles as defenceless targets.

On the ridge at causeways three and four, near the village of Saint Martin de Varreville, stood a particularly powerful battery of four Soviet 122-mm howitzers. Gaining control of the position was a top priority.

The task fell to the 502nd Parachute Infantry's 2nd Battalion. But those soldiers had been the first to jump on D-Day and the pathfinders didn't have all the necessary lights and radio transmitters in place by that time. The soldiers had therefore landed scattered several kilometres from their

RICHARD 'DICK' WINTERS (1918-2011)

When Dick Winters joined the army, he was quickly accepted into officer training school. Easy Company's commander-in-chief was killed on D-Day, so Winters took over the leadership, rallied the company's scattered forces and led an attack on a German battery. The effort earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, the US Army's second highest honour for bravery in war. Winters was portrayed in the TV series *Band of Brothers*.



destination, while key officers were either not in position or were dead. In the darkness of night, the soldiers tried in vain to orientate themselves in the terrain. The confusion threatened to send the 4th Division straight into a massacre. But as the paratroopers found each other, they spontaneously formed small, improvised units and eventually the chaotic drop proved to have surprising, unintended benefits.

Germans couldn't get overview

The confusion of the Allied soldiers also affected the Germans, who had difficulty assessing the true size and impact of the scattered forces that suddenly appeared across the landscape.

The misjudgement benefited the men of the 101st Airborne as they attacked the German gun position, reported Lieutenant LeGrand Johnson:

"I had about 30 men, who, as far as I know, comprised the force that was to destroy the guns. [We] took off in approved infantry school fashion, swarming over the area with no opposition. Colonel Chappuis was there with several men – by 07.00 we had less than 200 men assembled.

"[But] Colonel Chappuis and Captain Hank Plitt were 'accepting' surrender of the German troops in the underground area, which was a huge affair, like subway tunnels with ammunition and food. The [Germans] were sure chagrined when they came out with their hands up and learned that they outnumbered the hell out of us."

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cole enjoyed the same advantage, and his unit was tasked with taking the heavy howitzer gun positions at causeways three and four. When Cole reached causeway three shortly after sunrise, both the guns and the Germans had disappeared. Instead, Cole and his assembled group of 50 men welcomed the 4th Division to ▶

Americans attacked against all odds

Heavily outnumbered, Lieutenant Richard 'Dick' Winters was ordered to take a German position whose guns were aimed at Utah Beach. His action went down in history and in textbooks.

As a rule of thumb, an attack on an enemy position requires three times as many troops as the enemy. When Lieutenant Dick Winters was ordered to take the approximately 60-man gun position at Brécourt manor, he had 12 men at his disposal. By that rule of thumb, he should have had 180.

Winters and his men succeeded due to determined leadership and aggressive behaviour. Seven of the men sneaked up to a trench that connected the position's four guns. There, they first cleared a machine-gun nest and then destroyed a gun with dynamite and German grenades. The Americans then used the trench themselves. Crouched in safety, they moved quickly from gun to gun and blew them up. The aggression confused the Germans so much that they started shelling

positions that were still under German control. Furthermore the Americans took advantage of the fact that the Germans at Brécourt were not highly trained soldiers from a *Fallschirmjäger* (paratroop) regiment, as first assumed.

After taking and destroying all the guns in the position, the 13 men and a few reinforcements retreated under heavy fire. Shortly afterwards, Winters returned with two tanks, which quickly cleared the German troops from the manor house itself.

While clearing the third gun, Dick Winters found a map of all German gun and machine gun positions on a large part of the Cotentin Peninsula. The map proved to be an invaluable piece of intelligence for the army commanders in the further advance.

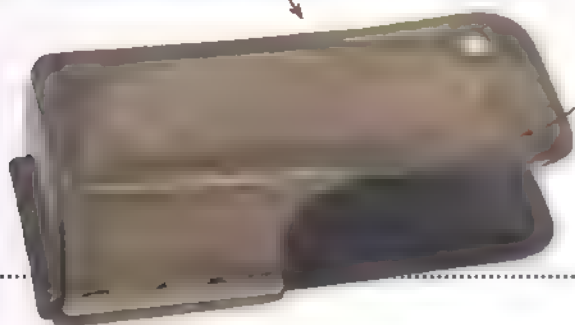
During WWII, paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st demonstrated several times – for example, during the Battle of the Bulge – that they had mastered the art of eliminating numerical superior enemy forces. The attack on Brécourt was honoured as a textbook example that was studied at the US military academy West Point until the turn of the millennium. Winters was also a guest lecturer there until 1997.

Brécourt housed German troops, who guarded the roads from the windows with machine guns. With one unit and two tanks, Winters took the manor.



101st soldiers used a brass cricket to identify themselves in the dark.

Pressing the device triggered a metallic click-clack sound that the other party had to respond to with two presses.



France. The fleeing German troops were surrounded and captured both there and at causeway one near Pouppeville by US forces advancing from both sides.

Major secured strategic route

The scattered landings strengthened the Allied element of surprise, and the improvised units took full advantage. A group of soldiers from the 502nd had landed north of their drop zone and were travelling along a narrow country road that ran towards the beach along the east coast of Cotentin. Near the village of Ravenoville, the troops encountered resistance as an enemy force from a large farm called Marmion shelled the paratroopers.

At the farm, the coastal road met the road to the village of Sainte-Mère-Église. A potentially important route for a German counter-attack ran through the village, and the paratroopers immediately took up the fight for Marmion. Major John Stopka of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment led the US troops.

When a scout forward of the group came under attack, he immediately dropped to the dusty road and returned fire. Stopka ordered his two lieutenants Ernest Harris and Howard Collins, who were right behind the scout, to advance and search the area for a possible weakness in the German defences.

The lieutenants took stock of the situation, gathered two men each, crossed the road and sneaked towards the fortified area. Collins took the left flank, while Harris took the right.

"Collins and Harris had not been gone more than ten minutes when I heard the chatter of several machine pistols and machine gun fire coming from the direction where Harris had gone. I heard some carbine firing and yelling by Harris.

"About one minute later, I saw Harris come out of the [building] with a group of the enemy with their hands up and somewhat worse for wear. There were 24 enemy prisoners," Stopka later wrote. Harris told the major that he had penetrated

behind the German position and started shooting them one by one as they came out:

"Harris said he had gotten behind their position, and as they came out he picked them off and made so much noise that the enemy apparently thought he had a small army with him. After losing six of their own, the rest gave up. After turning the prisoners over, Harris said he was going back to mop up the trenches."

The lieutenant's audacious approach paid off and awoke the fighting spirit of his fellow soldiers:

"[Later] I heard the chatter of machine guns, carbine fire and shouting by Harris. I could see Harris jumping a trench, shouting, firing his rifle, and generally making quite a scene. Following him at about 50 yards were his two men, creeping and crawling on their stomachs, looking rather timid and afraid to get out and move, but on seeing Harris jump up and fire, yell and carry on like he did, they got up and did the same thing."

Harris's efforts were rewarded. He was nominated for a medal and helped to secure control of the position for Major Stopka and his men. The farm turned out to be a local Nazi headquarters for around 200 troops. Despite fierce German counter-attacks,



FACTS

Over the 101st and 82nd Airborne lost

2,489

men on D-Day, spread equally between the two divisions. In the days that followed, up to nine per cent of the 82nd were killed in combat.

Stopka and his men held the farm until the 4th Division arrived with reinforcements.

German battery threatened causeway

With the securing of the causeways and the capture of several strategically important villages, the 101st Airborne had made good progress. But one obstacle still threatened to block the 4th Division's advance into France: the German positions at causeway two.

A group of paratroopers were heading towards Utah Beach when, shortly after sunrise, they discovered a German battery one kilometre north of the town of Sainte-Marie-du Mont. The battery was set up at an old manor house called Brécourt, about five kilometres from the beach. If the guns were left standing, they would catch large parts of the 4th Division in a death trap. Therefore, the position had to be taken and destroyed immediately.

The task fell to Richard 'Dick' Winters, who a few hours earlier had landed in the middle of a deserted field. In the distance, he could hear church bells ringing to alert a nearby town's inhabitants about a fire. Only when he met a soldier who had just seen a road sign for the town of Sainte-Mère-Église did Winters realise that he and his unit had landed

kilometres away from their intended drop zone. Twenty six year-old Winters was from Pennsylvania. He had no particular interest in the war, but had wanted to get his service over with, so he'd volunteered. Before long, he'd found himself in the paratroopers.

At Camp Croft in South Carolina, he was immediately recognised for his leadership skills and quickly advanced. By the time he landed in the field outside Sainte Mère Église, he held the rank of lieutenant, and Winters was acting second in command of E Company, a battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment assigned to secure access via causeway two. Winters and his unit had stopped at the town of Grand Chemin on the road from Sainte-Mère-Église to Utah Beach in the morning when he received the order.

"In about ten minutes, Lieutenant George Lavenson, the battalion adjutant, came walking down the line," Dick Withers said afterwards.

"Winters, they want you and your company up front. There's fire along that hedgerow there. Take care of it," the officer ordered, pointing to a spot in the distance.

Winters immediately gathered 12 men from his own and other companies. Without even knowing ▶

Gliders transported 4,000 troops to Normandy. The aircraft had the advantage of being silent and, unlike parachutes, they kept the troops together. But many gliders crashed.



Just as Compton was ready to hurl his grenades, I started across the field with the rest of the assault team. ■ Dick Winters on the attack on the battery at Brécourt.

what awaited behind the hedges, he set off towards Brécourt and the German battery.

Splinter unit stormed trench

As Winters crawled closer to investigate Brécourt, he realised to his horror why the position had to be taken at breakneck speed:

"While the non commissioned officers prepared the men for the assault, I conducted a hasty reconnaissance of the enemy position ... Crawling along a hedgerow, I moved to a position where I could get a better view of the enemy position ... The battery was firing directly down causeway number two in the direction of Utah Beach, where the initial waves of the 4th Infantry Division were already landing."

The German position consisted of a battery of four 105-mm field howitzers positioned along a long trench. On the other side of an open field behind the

position, a line of machine guns covered the howitzers. With around 60 German soldiers defending Brécourt, Winters quickly concluded that the cost in human lives would be too high if they charged across the field. Instead, he quickly devised a strategy to silence the guns. This spontaneous plan proved to be more effective than the lieutenant realised.

When Winters returned from his reconnaissance, he split his men up. Two men went with Lieutenant Buck Compton and three went with Winters, while the rest covered the two groups with machine-gun fire from behind. Compton and Winters were sneaking along separate hedges towards the battery when a machine gun positioned in the trench started blazing away.

Winters gave his gunners strict orders not to fire until they were sure they had a German in their sights. The enemy didn't know exactly where E Company was, and Winters didn't want pointless firing to give their position

Paratroopers from the 502nd pose with a captured Nazi flag after the battle for Marmion at Ravenoville.



away. Winters was sneaking towards Compton to unite the two groups when he spotted a German helmet.

"I squeezed off two rounds. I later found a pool of blood at this position, but no German," said Winters.

Once the two groups were assembled, Winters sent Compton and his men forward along the hedge to neutralise the machine-gun nest with grenades.

"Just as Compton was ready to hurl his grenades, I started across the field with the rest of the assault team so that we jumped into the position together as the grenades exploded. Simultaneously, we hurled additional grenades at the next position. In return we received substantial small arms fire and grenades from the enemy."

At about the same time, Compton and Winters took the machine-gun position and the first howitzer.

"As we approached the first gun, 'Popeye' Wynn was hit in the butt and fell down in the trench.

Rather than complaining that he was hit, he apologised, 'I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I goofed. I goofed. I'm sorry.' My God, it's beautiful when you think of a guy who was so dedicated to his company that he apologises for getting hit. Now, here was a soldier."

No sooner had 'Popeye' been helped up than a hand grenade flew through the air in the direction of Winters's group:

"We spread out as rapidly as possible, but Corporal Joe Toye of Reading, Pennsylvania, just flopped down and was unlucky enough to have the grenade fall between his legs as he lay face down. It went off as I was yelling at him to 'Move, for Christ's sake, move!' He just bounced up and down from the concussion, but he was unhurt and ready to go."

Three German soldiers left the gun positions and ran towards the Brécourt headquarters. But before they could reach safety, the Americans shot them down. Winters took care of a fourth German soldier who appeared between the trees 100 metres away. All in all, the shooting was over in 15-20 seconds. Winters's unit had captured the far end of the trench and quickly took



Tanks reinforced the paratroopers as they continued into war-torn Normandy.

the next gun. However, the Americans were running out of ammunition and were under constant fire. Winters sent for reinforcements and called two machine gunners forward. They arrived just in time, before the unit pounced on the third gun in the battery. The aggressive behaviour had confused the Germans, and they now fired on their own men before surrendering.

"As the German soldiers advanced toward us ... with their hands over their heads, they called, 'No make me dead!' ... Finally, I spotted Captain Hester ... He gave me three blocks of TNT and an incendiary grenade. I had these placed in the three guns we had already captured."

When the reinforcements arrived, they captured and destroyed the last gun. Three hours after the order had been given, the US soldiers had neutralised the heavily fortified position. The way was now open for the 4th Division, and the troops from Utah Beach poured ashore. Winters was hailed as one of the great heroes of D-Day, and his strategy was later regarded as a textbook example of how to take a gun position with only a few men.

That evening, Theodore Roosevelt Jr – son of the former president – met Robert Sink, commander of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, near Sainte-Marie-du-Mont. They greeted each other and shook hands. Roosevelt then removed his helmet and declared his respect for Robert Sink's men.

"The removal of my helmet is symbolic. I would like to take off my hat to every member of the 101st Airborne Division."

Roosevelt's respect was justified. The division's efforts were crucial to the success of the invasion, but the cost to the 7,000 paratroopers of the 101st Airborne was high. Approximately 1,250 were killed, missing or wounded. ■

AT THE SAME TIME

FINLAND:

- In June, the Soviets defeated the Finns at Vyborg.

USA:

- On 5th June troops sailed towards the small archipelago of the Mariana Islands to begin the so-called D-Day in the Pacific.

“Why were they killed and I wasn’t?”

By Michael Ruane and Henrik E. ng

Arden Earll was just 19 years old when the ramp of his landing craft was lowered on Omaha Beach on 6th June 1944. At 07.00, he fought his way ashore with comrades from the 29th Infantry Division's 116th Regiment and watched young men break down and friends die.

Arden C Earll sits in his wheelchair in the library of the nursing home where he lives, studying a list of the men from his company who were killed on Omaha Beach.

“Cowan,” he says, sounding like he’s taking a roll call of his platoon back in 1944. “Crawley. Hayes.” And then the 96-year-old man weeps as

he reads the names of everyone he knew. “Washburn” – his 21-year-old platoon leader who was mowed down right in front of him the moment they left the landing craft that hit Omaha Beach on D-Day. “McGrath” – an acquaintance from Pennsylvania, where Arden Earll lived

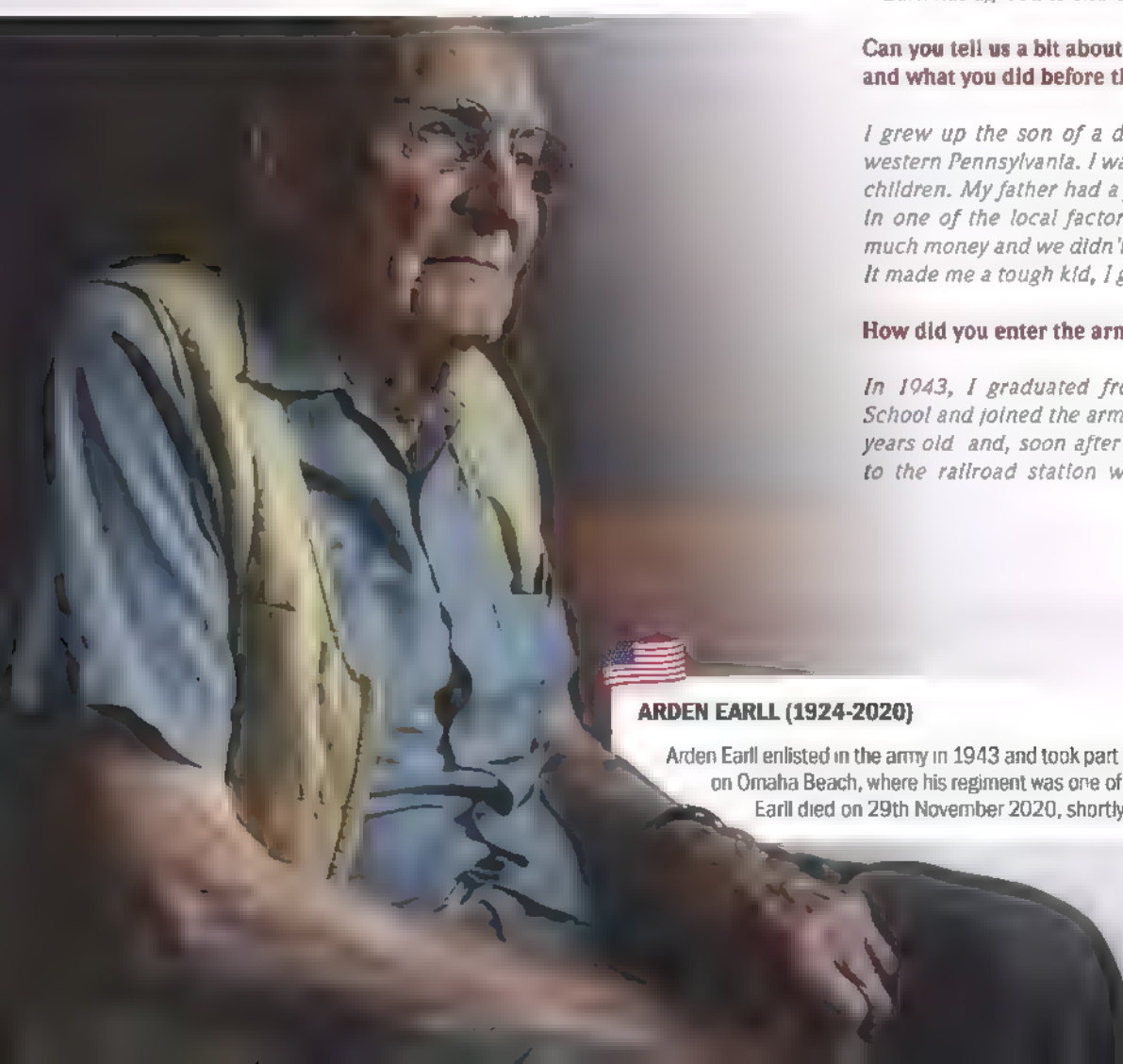
Earll has agreed to share his story.

Can you tell us a bit about where you're from and what you did before the war?

I grew up the son of a dairy farmer in north western Pennsylvania. I was the youngest of four children. My father had a farm but also worked in one of the local factories. Neither job paid much money and we didn't have much to live on. It made me a tough kid, I guess.

How did you enter the army?

In 1943, I graduated from Union City High School and joined the army right away. I was 18 years old and, soon after being drafted, I went to the railroad station where the troop train



ARDEN EARLL (1924-2020)

Arden Earll enlisted in the army in 1943 and took part in the D-Day assault on Omaha Beach, where his regiment was one of the hardest hit. Earll died on 29th November 2020, shortly after this interview.



picked me up. The train travelled through Pennsylvania, stopping at all the small town stations and picking up young men who had signed up for the war.

What is the first thing you remember from your time as a soldier in the US Army?

We had a few months of training and then on 14th December 1943, I found myself on the fast troopship Queen Elizabeth heading for Britain. It was a bit unreal, but six days later, I reached Scotland. We trained there until D-Day, and by June 1944 I had become part of Company H. We all knew we were about to go into battle and our company went to the south of England to wait for the invasion.

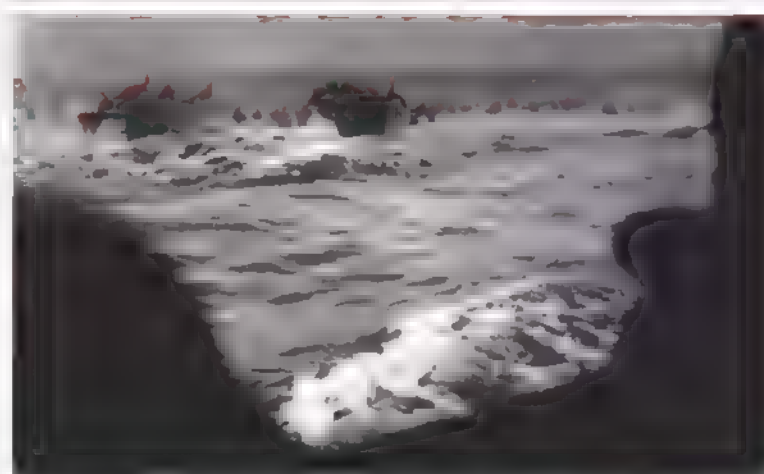
The day before D-Day, a big pit was dug and a bonfire was lit in it at our camp in Weymouth. Then the officers ordered us soldiers to throw away all non-essential items we couldn't carry with us to France. Cartons of cigarettes went into the flames along with personal items and other things. I remember one man had a guitar. When we were in camp, he sat around evenings playing his guitar. The last I saw of that guitar it was down there in that hole, burning up.

How did D-Day begin for you?

On the day itself, we were in uniform with the blue and grey logo of the 20th Division on our helmets. I was in full combat gear and carried 81-mm mortar ammunition. I had a life belt around it and I put it in the water and floated it ahead of me. I also had an old 1903 Springfield rifle. The new .30 calibre carbines we were promised never materialised, so we were issued World War I weapons. We took those Springfields and we cleaned them all up, and that's what we took in on D-Day.

Our crossing began on a large transport ship, the USS Thomas Jefferson, where the chaplains held services below deck as we sailed towards France. Eisenhower's famous D Day message was also read aloud.

"Soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force: you are about to embark upon the great crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty loving people everywhere march with you."



Can you tell us about the Channel crossing to Normandy?

At one point, we climbed from the transport ship into our landing craft and headed for the coast. We were about 15 miles (24 km) out and the trip took three hours. I remember sailing close to the warship USS Texas, which was bombarding the coast. Every time she fired her guns, the ship rocked and sent such big waves against our landing craft that I was sure we would capsize.

I was positioned at the front of the landing craft during the crossing, which was my choice. The sea was so choppy it was frightening, and I was soaking wet and cold from the spray. Still, I was falling asleep and struggling to stay awake, so I stood up at the front. I had taken too many seasickness pills. I'd never taken the pills before, but the army always gave them to soldiers so they wouldn't be ill and vomit when they hit the beaches. But they made you drowsy.

I had always thought I was tough enough to make it through the voyage without tablets. "By God, I'm tough," I told myself. "I come from a farm. I don't need any of your damn pills."

But when the pill bottle was passed around the vessel that morning, I changed my mind. "When we get on dry land again, they're going to be shooting at me – I better be damn sure that I'm not sick," I thought.

So, when the pill bottle came round, I took a handful instead of the recommended two or three. As you know, D Day was what they call the longest day. Well, on the longest day, I went▶

The first wave of the attack should have paved the way for Arden Earl's company. But they had landed at the wrong point on the beach, and Earl's company ended up in the line of fire.

to sleep. I dozed in and out of consciousness, so I positioned myself up front and hoped the spraying cold water would wake me up. By the time I got very close to land, I was wide awake again. But I was soaked to the skin.

We were part of the second wave and by 07:00 we had been in the small landing craft for about three hours as it ploughed towards Normandy. Now we were close to the beach and someone said, "There's France!" But when I looked, I couldn't see land, only thick smoke. Company A had gone in about 30 minutes earlier. They were in the first wave and should have cleared the obstacles on the beach so we could quickly start attacking when we landed. But they had landed somewhere else, so we were the first to land in our sector. I know that 103 men from A Company were killed in the first wave. The 3,400 men in my division were to attack a three mile stretch of Omaha Beach, where there were several pathways leading inland. Our precise objective was the position at a place called Les Moulins, close to the sector of the beach called Dog Red.

Then the ramp on your landing craft was lowered. What happened in those seconds

when you suddenly came face to face with the enemy for the first time after all your training?

When the ramp was lowered, we stepped into knee deep water. Our sergeant, Washburn, shouted: "Let's go!"

He was the first one out of the boat and I was right behind him. We made it about 20-25 yards through the water towards the beach when Washburn fell over. I saw him go into the water. When he got up, I could see that he was hurt bad. Something had hit him all up and down the front of him. He went back down into the water and never got up.

Washburn was a good friend of mine. He was the son of a carpenter from Virginia and had several brothers and sisters. He had found a home in the service. I remember him always bragging that he would never be caught with a dirty rifle, and he had just been promised an officer's commission. Well, Washburn just lived for that day, and he never made it.

Everything we had been told before the invasion went down the drain. We had been promised that planes and the navy would bomb the Germans to pieces and there would be no

In 2014 and 2019, Arden Earll (second from left) took part in the commemorations for the 70th and 75th anniversaries of D-Day in Normandy.



Sometimes I think, "Why were they killed and I wasn't?"

■ Arden Earll on the fighting on Omaha Beach on D-Day

resistance. They said we would be able to wade straight ashore. We heard the planes flying overhead that night, but they dropped their bombs three miles inland instead of on the coast. Nothing had been destroyed when we reached the beach.

How did you manage to defeat the Germans?

Despite the German shelling, we couldn't stop. We had been told to keep going no matter what. I dropped my mortar ammunition to run faster and a sniper shot at me but missed. As I ran across the beach, I saw a young soldier lying perfectly still, just crying and calling for his mum. He was just a kid. He didn't look like he was even old enough to be there. He'd broke. Some of them did break. He was laying there in the sand. He was crying for his mother to come and take him home.

I tried to talk to him. I said, "Buddy, your mother is six thousand miles away. She will never get here to take you home. Get out of it!" But we had our orders to keep going. I had to leave him.

As I ran forward, I saw a single American tank playing cat and mouse with the German defenders. The tank fired and then drove quickly around the beach. But the Germans had started firing at it with everything they had, and as I ran around the tank and onwards, a German mortar shell exploded, filling my right arm with shrapnel.

"I'm hit!" I shouted, as we had been told to, and looked down at my arm, which was bleeding heavily. But I quickly regained my senses. I wasn't badly injured and I could still walk. A medic bandaged me up, and I and the others from the 116th fought onwards through the endless day.

What happened in the days after D-Day? Did you keep fighting?

The next morning, they had decided that we were shot up so bad, they put another regiment through us, and we went back on the beach and reorganised. As I walked back along the devastation of Omaha Beach, I saw dead American soldiers who had been washed ashore by the tide. Among the dead was the frightened young man I had seen on the beach earlier. God had come and taken him home. His mother could not.



It must have been frightening and difficult to fight the German defenders in machine-gun positions and bunkers. Why do you think the invasion succeeded despite the chaos?

Everything was chaos and it wasn't anything like they'd told us it was going to be when they briefed us in England. What really won the battle of Omaha Beach was the determination of the individual American soldier. The plan that had been in place for months wasn't working, so those of us on the beaches had to do it our own way.

As it turned out, Omaha Beach was the most heavily defended beach and the bloodiest during the Allied landings. Towards the end of the day, I remember a buddy saying that you could see thousands of bodies on the beach. You could walk on the bodies as far as you could see without touching the ground. That's how many dead there were. Today, when you visit the American cemetery, you can see how many didn't come home. So many died, and sometimes I think, "Why were they killed and I wasn't?" Why? You don't know.

Arden Earll lived the rest of his life with traces of the landing in his body. A piece of shrapnel from the mortar that hit him on Omaha Beach was lodged under the skin of his right arm. Earll called it a souvenir and proof of what he went through.

On D-Day, 18 soldiers from his company died; the total US loss on Omaha Beach was 2,501. The dead are buried in the US cemetery nearby. ■

Arden Earll received two Purple Hearts during World War II for the two times he was wounded, one of which was on Omaha Beach.



BLOODBATH ON OMAHA BEACH

On a stretch of beach about 300m long and several metres wide lay hundreds upon hundreds of lifeless bodies of American soldiers, in places several on top of each other.

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Omaha Beach, 6th June 1944



The US soldiers who fought their way ashore at Omaha Beach met stiffer resistance than expected. Ninety per cent of the men in the first wave of attacks were killed.

Bloodbath on Omaha Beach

As paratroopers landed behind the Normandy coastline, a gigantic armada headed towards the French beaches. One particular stretch had the Allies' attention: Omaha Beach. Here, the entrance was treacherous, the waters littered with mines, and the tides and German positions combined to create a terrifying death trap.

By Esben Münster Kjær

As US and British paratroopers flew towards Normandy, the largest armada the world had ever seen gathered off the coast of southern England before heading towards France. The first tentative steps towards the Allied landings in Normandy from the sea – dubbed Operation Neptune by Allied generals – were underway. A full moon shone down upon thousands of transport ships and landing craft ferrying the Allied invasion army across the English Channel on the night of 6th June 1944. Large battleships, cruisers and nearly 140 destroyers were tasked with keeping German aircraft and ships at a safe distance that night, and before dawn the ships' guns would thunder relentlessly at the French coast.

To an outsider, the invasion fleet might look invincible with its enormous firepower, but appearances were deceiving. During these first few hours, the entire operation depended on a particularly vulnerable spearhead. At the front of the armada were 255 minesweepers, which had been tasked with clearing ten shipping lanes through the minefields the Germans had laid in the English Channel. If they failed, D-Day would have to be cancelled. For the same reason, Allied High Command had also accepted in advance that this part of the mission would probably end in massive casualties.

On board a British minesweeper ship, Alistair Sawrey Cookson waited nervously, his nerves on edge:

"Away to port there stretched formations of sweepers, now opening out for their sweeping stations. They had to sweep the channels for the bombarding battleships. To starboard, more sweepers, away to the horizon, and perhaps beyond."

In the wake of the minesweepers, the invasion fleet's vulnerable ships started forward at a modest speed of just seven knots (around 13 km/h). As the fleet began to move, the soldiers aboard the ships could hear a distant noise in the darkness. Allied aircraft had begun dropping their payloads over the German lines. Invasion beaches, inland defence positions and the strategic cities of Caen and Cherbourg were under bombardment. Later, sailors could see searchlights and tracer projectiles lighting up the skies over the French mainland as waves of aircraft buzzed overhead. American paratroopers descended defenceless under heavy fire, yet the German guns on the coast of France remained strangely silent and no torpedo boats patrolled the waters. It appeared

no German could imagine what was coming across the English Channel under the cover of darkness.

Omaha was the target

Behind the minesweepers, transport ships bobbed up and down. Lieutenant Dean Rockwell's flotilla of 16 LCTs (Landing Craft, Tanks), each carrying four tanks, were the slowest of the invasion fleet as well as the least seaworthy. With their flat bottoms, they were unstable in the water; the wind pushed them off course as their shallow gunwales struggled in the choppy waters:

"So, combined with our weight, we had very little freeboard. In fact, the seas were running in over our decks."

While Rockwell's men battled seasickness and fear, those on the larger troopships had a more comfortable crossing, even though the soldiers were packed tightly together. The frustration that had prevailed during the chaotic departure was gradually replaced by tension as the crew realised that this would not be just another exercise.

Some calmed their nerves by gambling with the 'invasion francs' that Allied presses had printed for use after the landing. Others read novels, wrote letters to loved ones or brooded. One soldier though, dejectedly about the imminent loss of comrades he had lived and trained with for years, while the waiting was occasionally interrupted by detailed briefings in which the troops were prepared for the task at hand.

Private John Barnes belonged to the US Army's 116th Regiment's A Company, which was to be part of the first wave on to a beach the generals had named Omaha. A total of 40,000 men, as well as tanks, guns and vehicles, were scheduled to be deployed on this coast before sunset on the first day of the invasion.

"It seemed so organised that nothing could go wrong,

nothing could stop it. It was like a train schedule; we were almost just like passengers. We were aware that there were many landing boats behind us, all lined up coming in on schedule. Nothing could stop it."

Barnes and the rest of the 116th Regiment had never seen combat. Until now, the war had been spent training, and for the enlisted soldiers, the extremely detailed battle plan was reassuring. Older and experienced officers, however, were less impressed, according to one captain from another regiment:

"It was thicker than the biggest telephone book you've ever seen. After the briefing was completed, Colonel Good stood up, he picked it up and tried to tear it in half, but it was so thick that this strong man couldn't do it. So he simply threw it over his shoulder and said, 'Forget this goddamned thing. You get your ass on the beach. I'll be there waiting for you and I'll tell you what to do. There ain't anything in this plan that is going to go right.'"

While it was still dark, the invasion troops going ashore at Omaha had breakfast. On board the British ships, a pint of rum was part of the daily diet, and some American soldiers became a little inebriated after the British sailors handed them their own daily ration. A small bonus for the men about to storm Hitler's Atlantic Wall.

Shots rang out over land

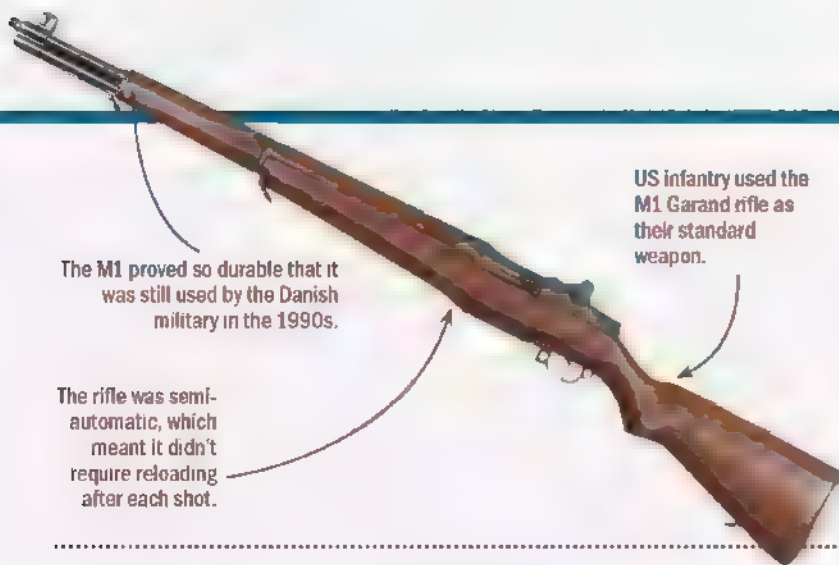
Inland, the German defenders could clearly hear the noise of aircraft engines and gunfire from the zones where Allied paratroopers were dropping. Twenty-year-old machine gunner Heinrich Severloh was sleeping in the loft of a stable when he was awoken by a breathless oberleutnant named Frerking.

"It's happening! Come, Hein, I have been telephoned. We're off! Threatening danger...!"

Frerking and Severloh travelled by car to the beach the Americans had named Omaha. Here they hurried to their post at *Widerstandsnest* (resistance nest) ►

The stench was unbearable in the small landing craft, where seasick soldiers vomited on deck or into their helmets.





US infantry used the M1 Garand rifle as their standard weapon.

The M1 proved so durable that it was still used by the Danish military in the 1990s.

The rifle was semi-automatic, which meant it didn't require reloading after each shot.

62. Many Germans felt relief rather than fear, as they'd been waiting for the Allied invasion for months and the uncertainty had worn away at their nerves. But nothing could yet be seen at sea, and the staff at headquarters still believed the Allied parachute attacks were merely minor operations.

If Severloh had been able to peer into the darkness and across the English Channel, he would have been greeted with an awe-inspiring sight. Out in that darkness, the larger Allied ships were launching hundreds of smaller landing craft. The young gunner would also have seen the thousands upon thousands of soldiers who, by the light of the moon, struggled over the gunwales of the transport ships to climb down scramble nets towards the landing craft.

The final plunge into the choppy boats resulted in sprains and broken bones, and some even lost their lives as the first of the invasion forces. The unlucky ones were crushed to death if a wave lifted a landing craft and slammed it against the side of a ship just as they were about to climb down.

Some were spared the dangerous descent, however, because their troopship could launch loaded landing craft. Major Tom Dallas of the 116th Regiment would have preferred to climb down, however, because his boat had only made it halfway down when the davit lowering it from the British ship *Empire Javelin* got stuck. The American soldiers then spent half an hour hanging just below the ship's sewage drain:

"Yells from the boat were unavailing. Streams, coloured everything from canary yellow to slenna brown and olive green, continued to flush into the command group, decorating every man aboard. We cursed, we cried, and we laughed, but it kept coming. When we started for shore, we were all covered with shit."

The men would spend hours in the small boats, and most of them hated every minute of it. Foam sprayed over the rails, soaking the soldiers' uniforms and leaving the men shivering with cold. Seasickness also took its toll, as wind and waves tossed the small vessels around. Some threw up in their helmets, which they then tried to rinse out in the sea, while

others simply doubled over. The stench from the deck and the soiled uniforms set even the most seaworthy stomachs in motion.

The armada of small landing craft gathered in formation and began their slow journey towards the beach. The morning's first rays of sunlight brightened the eastern sky, and behind them, from the direction of the English coast, the roar of hundreds of engines grew louder. The air force was on its way.

Destructive force would pave the way

In the grey dawn, the Germans from the 352nd Infantry Division at Omaha finally spotted the ships emerging from the morning mist. It was about 05.00. Private Severloh sat at his machine gun and was overwhelmed by the sight that unfolded before him:

"The most powerful armada of all time — an endless line of gigantic battleships."

Soon the gunner could also make out the hum of engines. However, the sound wasn't coming from the fleet out at sea, but from above, where countless small dots suddenly appeared on the horizon and rapidly grew larger as they approached.

"The noise grew ever louder, and as the huge bomber fleet flew straight for us in a ghostly fashion through an overcast, grey sky, the sound of the engines grew to a hellish thunder."

Over 5,000 Allied bombers were in the air on D-Day, ranging from small planes designed for precision bombing to giants with four engines that usually dropped their deadly cargo over cities and factories in Germany.

"Every man jumped into a bunker or dugout. Then the broad formation of heavy bombers roared over us and onwards. Their payload came whistling, howling and crashing down. The bombs fell like heavy rain. The first one landed barely 50 metres behind our position. Everything began to shake — even our small observation bunker built into the ground — and earth and lumps of chalk flew up all around us, but the bombers missed their target."

The cloud cover over the beach meant that bombers had to aim from maps and aircraft navigation instruments. But the gunners knew that if they bombed the beach or the cliff behind Omaha Beach, they risked hitting the landing craft coming in. Therefore, they dropped the payload further inland, where it had little effect. The 352nd Infantry Division, for example, did not lose a single one of its 20 guns positioned less than a kilometre from the coast. Meanwhile, the Allied armada joined in with its guns at 05.30. Three cruisers and 11 destroyers contributed to the drumbeat on Omaha Beach. The heaviest booms came from the old battleships *Arkansas* and *Texas*, their combined 22 heavy guns capable of firing a broadside of over 11,000 tonnes of shells. *Baltimore* ►

Secret report paved the way

French resistance fighters and radio intercepts were just two sources used to map the coastal defences in Normandy. The information was compiled in a 112-page report that only the most trusted were allowed to see.

Just six weeks before D Day, Allied generals received one of the most secret documents of World War II. In the so-called *Neptune Monograph*, the intelligence service had gathered information on everything from currents and tides to drawings of German defence positions and descriptions of the

sand on the invasion beaches. The report was the result of years of work, with frogmen observing the invasion beaches under the cover of night, pilots photographing German bunkers, and the French Resistance sending information about the German forces in Normandy. At the same time, leading

geologists, meteorologists and mathematicians worked to predict both tides and currents over a period of months. The report was so important that it was labelled Top Secret Bigot - the highest level of security during the war - and only a few men saw it before D-Day.

UNCLASSIFIED



PREPARED BY
COMMANDER TASK FORCE 112
APRIL 1944

TOP SECRET BIGOT
UNTIL DEPARTURE FOR COMBAT OPERATIONS
THEN THIS SHEET BECOMES UNCLASSIFIED
PREPARED BY COMMANDER TASK FORCE 112, APRIL 1944

TOP SECRET:

The *Neptune Monograph* was labelled Top Secret Bigot - the absolute highest level of secrecy during World War II. In its 112 pages, the report described everything from climate to coastal defences in detail.

UNCL

TOP
SECRET

BEACH WAS LONG:

Omaha Beach was given its own section in the report. It described the access roads, slopes, the position of German machine guns and bunkers, and of course its length and width.

21 APRIL, 1944

CLASSIFIED

TOP SECRET BIGOT

OMAHA BEACH
(COLLEVILLE - ST LAURENT - VIREVILLE)

LINES

WEST TO EAST

637947 636693

49° 23' 17" N. 49° 21' 36" N.
0° 55' 06" W. 0° 50' 10" W.

Longitudes

1. GENERAL DESCRIPTION:

OMAHA BEACH, 7,500 yards long, is composed of fine sand with shingle occurring - part of the beach for a distance of about 25 yards. Several sand bars exist inside the tidal area. The beach is flanked by hard shale. At the western end, this rock formation extends 1,300 yards along the beach, and at a point 500 yards from the western end, the rocks extend 120 to 150 yards to seaward.

Except for its western end, the beach is backed by a low narrow embankment, used for part of its length by a masonry wall, behind which is a level, sandy grass covered shelf averaging 100 yards in width. Back of the shelf is an 80-foot grass covered bluff broken by four natural valley exits, through which run roads. The western quarter of the beach is backed by a steep 80-foot cliff. A level cultivated plateau lies inland of this entire section of the coast.

The valleys are blocked by anti-tank obstacles, mines and wire, and the entire beach is defended by strong points and batteries. A line of obstacles exists along the beach at a distance of 50 to 130 yards to seaward from the back of the beach.

A detailed description follows: Refer to Police A and B.

11. LENGTH: 7,500 Yds. (Constant line).
7,446 Yds. (Between coordinates).

111. WIDTH: Varies with the height of the tide. See SKETCH (Police A and B) including TIDAL DATA and GRADIENTS on back thereof.

iv. LANDMARKS:

- (a) 647910 - VIREVILLE Steeple (100 feet high).
- (b) 636926 - Tower (30 ft. high).
- (c) 636805 - Valley.
- (d) 678900 - Valley.
- (e) 665907 - Valley.
- (f) 648918 - Valley.

v. APPROACH: Clear to seaward from low water mark. (See MAP CHART F-1015 for best data available on soundings.)

SAND WAS FIRM: Of particular interest was the beach's sand. It was deemed safe for heavy vehicles, which would not run the risk of getting stuck

ed by a bank which, with depths of less than 5-fathoms, extends about 3/4 of a mile NE and about one mile ESE of the point. When the wind is against the tidal stream, a tide race, known as RAS DE LA PERCE, is formed over this bank. Under all wind conditions, turbulent currents are to be expected in this area, except during slack water.

(b) On both flanks of the beach there are underwater rocks composed of hard shale. At the western end, a strip of shale and shingle runs for 1,300 yards along the beach near the high tide mark. At a point 500 yards from the western end, a spur from this shale extends seaward 120 to 150 yards from the back of the beach.

(c) A rocky outcrop near the high water mark will be found in the vicinity of 651917.

vi. GRADIENTS: In general flat up to Mean Level (13 ft.), then increasingly steep. (See GRADIENT DATA on back of Police A and B.)

vii. SAND BARS: A series of low sand bars exists along the entire

NEPTUNE MONOGRAPH-CTF 122

UNCLASSIFIED

Sun war correspondent Bradley Holbrook witnessed the bombardment from a command ship:

"The sound of battle is something I'm used to. But this was the loudest thing I have ever heard. There was more firepower than I've ever heard in my life and most of us felt that this was the moment of our life, the crux of it, the most outstanding."

Nothing could survive a firestorm like this – or everyone who witnessed the bombardment from the sea thought. In fact, the effect was far less than the Allies had expected. Prior to the invasion, generals and admirals spent months discussing the invasion's tactics. Some wanted to land at night so they could catch the Germans off guard. Others favoured landing only after the ships' guns had been given several hours of daylight to blow the German positions to smithereens. The compromise was 35 minutes of bombardment. In practice, however, this gave the Germans time to prepare, and the bombardment was so short that the shells only made scratches in the metre-thick concrete. Almost all 120 bunkers at Omaha Beach remained intact as the landing craft traveled the final stretch to the beach.

Tank unit went to the bottom

The Allies had one last weapon to deploy before the first wave reached the coast. Instead of vehicles, large LCT(R) carriers had been loaded with launchers that could fire around 1,000 rockets, each weighing 27 kg, at the Germans. The weapons had a range of just over 1,000 metres, and all the operator had to do was pull the trigger to fire the lot in a series of 24 salvos.

At 06.25, a few minutes before the first wave hit Omaha, the rocket ships had travelled far enough in, and medic WN Solkin took cover with the rest of the crew on his rocket boat:

"Our skipper was in the conning tower with his finger on a button. We held our breath, hanging on to anything that was stationary. We fired our rockets and hell broke loose. The ship seemed to explode. We listed sharply and I remember being buried under arms and legs. Now the fire extinguishers came into play. Small fires broke out and smoke rose up through the bulkheads. The heat and noise were terrific. Everyone was cursing and screaming and fighting the flames that threatened to envelop the entire craft."

Smoke from the LCT(R) masked the fact that the rockets ended up in the waves. They didn't blow holes in the Germans' barbed wire, nor did they make craters for soldiers to take cover in as they struggled up the beach. Their only victims were fish and oysters. Further back, another Allied invention also disappointed. US tanks had been equipped with a rubberised canvas flotation screen and two large propellers at the back so they could sail themselves to the beach. According to the timetable, the so-called

DD (duplex drive) Shermans would be the first to arrive on shore. By the time the first wave of infantry arrived shortly afterwards, the tanks would have lowered their screen and be ready to cover the landing with their guns.

The first tanks had slid down the ramps of Lieutenant Dean Rockwell's 16 landing craft five kilometres out, as planned. But the sea was too choppy, and the force of the waves soon crushed the canvas flotation screens, causing the tonne heavy



STRENGTH RATIOS

On D-Day, the Allies landed on five different beaches with over

156,000
soldiers

Facing them were around

50,000

German soldiers. On the day, Allied casualties reached over 10,000.

The sound of battle is something I'm used to. But this was the loudest thing I have ever heard. ■ Holbrook Bradley, war correspondent.

armoured vehicles to sink to the bottom. The sight caused Rockwell to change his battle plan. He signaled his skippers to ignore the danger and continue all the way to the beach with the tanks loaded before launching. Some, however, didn't get the message and kept sending DD Shermans into the water. Out of 29 tanks launched, only two managed to make it to shore, and both were far behind schedule. The other tanks were transported to the shore, and Rockwell's own LCT 535 became the first

Allied vessel to reach the French coast on D-Day. To his surprise, the Germans hadn't fired on him yet.

At 06.29 he lowered the front ramp, the first Sherman rolled into the shallow water and all hell broke loose. A German gun off to the right opened fire and shells whistled across the beach. Three landing craft were hit in quick succession, and Rockwell figured he would be the next target. But then the enemy gunner moved his sights to the tanks travelling up the beach. The lieutenant raised the ramp, and as he sailed away ►



Pointe du Hoc was one of the few places where Allied bombers actually hit their targets. It allowed US Rangers to find cover in the cliff's bomb craters.



HIGGINS LANDING CRAFT

Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel

River barge changed World War II

Self-taught shipbuilder Andrew Higgins designed the landing craft that sailed the first waves of soldiers to Omaha Beach. He built the small vessel from wood, which was useless to the rest of the war industry.

Before World War II, Andrew Higgins built flat-bottomed wooden boats that could navigate the swamps at the mouth of the Mississippi River. This experience later served him well when the US Navy needed lightweight

vessels to land soldiers on beaches. Higgins's idea of a landing craft was built from plywood, and because the rest of the war industry used little wood, he never ran out of materials for his LCPV (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel). The

Allied commander-in-chief, Dwight D. Eisenhower, later said that Higgins was "the man who won the war for us". Twenty thousand Higgins boats were built during the war and 1,089 of them were in service on D-Day.

RAMP: The boat's ramp was made of steel to protect the soldiers from gunfire. Because it took up the entire width of the boat, soldiers could quickly storm out.

CARGO HOLD: The Higgins boat could carry 36 soldiers or a jeep and 12 men.

CREW: Each boat had a mate, an engineer and two sailors who handled moorings and manned the two machine guns.

HULL: The bottom and sides of the boat were made from plywood. It weighed less than the British armoured landing craft, could sail faster and didn't flood as easily. However, it was not bulletproof.



again, the duel between US tanks and German guns continued. One by one, the exposed Shermans were put out of action. Several were engulfed in flames when the first wave of infantry arrived shortly afterwards.

Landing craft lost to the waves

At the same time as the tanks battled the German defenders, Higgins boats and British landing craft were now approaching the beach after an hours-long voyage to the coast. The British and US landing craft were constructed differently, but both types carried a platoon of 32 US soldiers. At the front of each was a sergeant and five riflemen. Behind them were four men with barbed-wire cutters to clear a path through the German barricades, while four two-man teams covered them, each equipped with two light machine guns and two bazookas. Following them were four men with a light mortar and two men with a flamethrower. At the rear, a five-man demolition team was ready with TNT, and finally another sergeant and a medic followed. A lieutenant led the platoon.

Infantry divisions were designed to make their way up the 300-400-metre-wide beach on their own, while tanks provided covering fire. According to intelligence reports, the coastal cliff was defended by just 600 enemy, many of whom were said to be reluctant Poles and Soviets. The platoons were expected to easily capture the cliffs before the company and battalion commanders arrived with their staffs 30 minutes later, and then the troops could unite into larger units before advancing inland. By sunset, the bridgehead was scheduled to be eight kilometres deep.

But everything had already started to go wrong on the way in. The waves washed so much water over the landing craft that their pumps and the soldiers' helmets could barely keep up. Private

Barnes of the 116th Regiment was in a landing craft whose journey ended about a kilometre from shore:

"Suddenly, a swirl of water wrapped around my ankles, and the front of the craft dipped down. The water quickly reached our waist and we shouted to the

other boats on each side. They waved in return. Our boat just fell away below me. I squeezed the CO, tube in my life belt. The buckle broke and it popped away. I turned to grab the back of the man behind me. I was going down under. I climbed on his back and pulled myself up in a panic. Heads bobbed up above the water. We could see the other boats moving off toward shore."

The coxswains were under strict orders not to stop to pick up survivors on the way in. Fortunately, Barnes saw a flamethrower floating by with two life jackets tied around it.

"I hugged it tight but still seemed to be going down. I couldn't keep my head above the surface. I tried to pull the release straps on my jacket but I couldn't move. Lieutenant Gearing grabbed my jacket and used his bayonet to cut the straps and release me from the weight. I was all right now, I could swim."

A while later, they heard a British voice shouting at them and an LCA (Landing Craft Assault) appeared on its way back out. Barnes and the other survivors were hauled aboard and by lunchtime ended up on *Empire Javelin*, the same ship they had left 11 hours earlier. Meanwhile, the rest of the 116th Regiment's A Company had been wiped out on the beach.

Death waited on the beach

The sea current dragged at the landing craft, and many of the young US coxswains were unable to stay on course. The Higgins boats with the neighbouring company had disappeared without a trace when the British LCAs landed A Company on the western flank, exactly where they were supposed to.

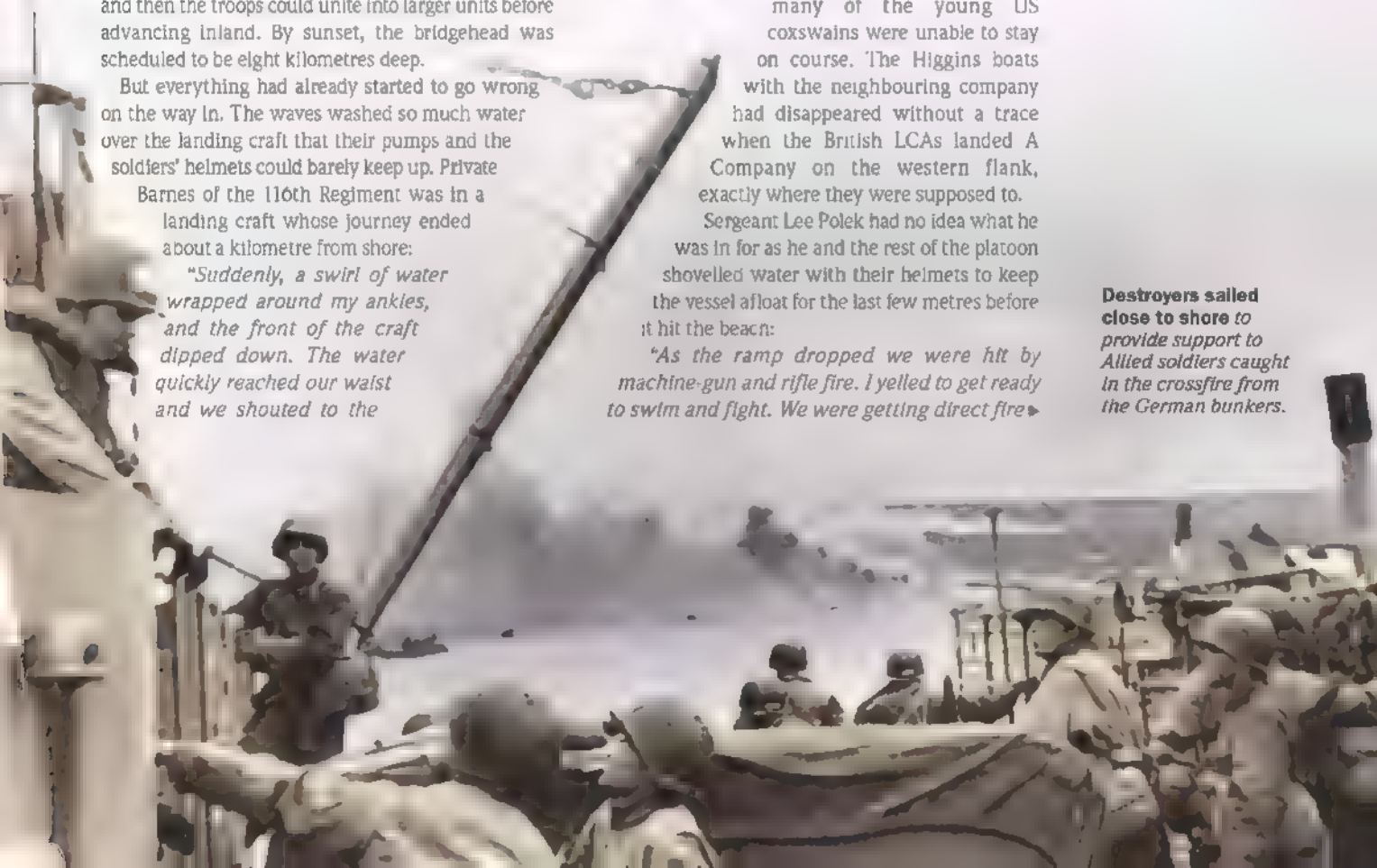
Sergeant Lee Polek had no idea what he was in for as he and the rest of the platoon shovelled water with their helmets to keep the vessel afloat for the last few metres before it hit the beach:

"As the ramp dropped we were hit by machine-gun and rifle fire. I yelled to get ready to swim and fight. We were getting direct fire ▶

FACTS

On Omaha Beach, the Americans were tasked with taking out eight German artillery bunkers, **18 anti-tank guns**, 45 rocket launchers, six gun turrets and 85 machine-gun positions

Destroyers sailed close to shore to provide support to Allied soldiers caught in the crossfire from the German bunkers.



right into our craft. My three squad leaders in front and others were hit. Some men climbed over the side. Two sailors got hit. I got off in water only ankle deep, tried to run but the water was suddenly up to my hips. I crawled to hide behind a steel beach obstacle. Bullets hit off it, others hit more of my men. Got up to the beach to crawl behind the shingle and a few of my men joined me. I took a head count and there was only 11 of us left, from the 30 on the craft."

The absence of craters from Allied bombs and rockets meant that the German machine guns had a clear field of fire. The Americans had to cross several hundred metres of flat beach before they could take cover behind a low wall in front of the coast's steep cliffs. Before they arrived, 90 per cent of the company's 200 men were killed or wounded while the survivors possessed few weapons between them.

Meanwhile, the 116th Regiment's E Company reached the coast far to the east of its objective. Private Harry Parley carried a heavy 30-kg flamethrower on his back that would turn him into a human torch if hit. As the ramp of his Higgins boat went down, he saw other vessels being hit by shells while others were already burning. He followed the men in front into the water, but the weight dragged him down and only the help of a comrade saved him from drowning.

As Parley coughed up water, he slowly got to his feet and began to stumble forwards. Later, he wondered why he hadn't dropped the burdensome flamethrower like so many others did that morning. In fact, he was possibly the only one in the entire first wave of the attack to make it to the embankment with his weapon intact on his back. Other men took cover from direct fire there, but few could fight:

"The enormity of our situation came as I realised that we had landed in the wrong sector and that many of the people around me were from other units and strangers to me. What's more, the terrain before us was not what I had been trained to encounter. I remember removing my

flamethrower and trying to dig a trench while lying on my stomach. Failing that, I searched and found a discarded BAR. But we could see nothing above us to return the fire. We were the targets."

The first wave of attacks had been drilled time and again, so the men could disable the German positions on Omaha Beach. But there was no battle at all. The survivors of the shattered units huddled together wherever they could find shelter, shaken by the carnage.

Fresh cannon fodder was sent in

Allied intelligence had been wrong with its report on what resistance the soldiers could expect at Omaha Beach. The positions were not defended by 600 demotivated Poles and Soviets, but by around 2,000 men from the 352nd Division, many of whom were German. This number equalled the entire first attack wave while it was still at full strength.

The Germans also had the great advantage of being exactly where they needed to be. In contrast, US troops landed in the wrong areas, meaning all plans failed from the first minute. The defenders, on the other hand, had carefully thought out and measured fields of fire so that a fine-meshed crossfire could be laid across the beach. From his post in Widerstandsnest 62, Private Severloh fired a series of snarling volleys from his machine gun:

"I could clearly see the water shoot up where my machine gun bullets hit. When the small fountains approached the GIs, they threw themselves down. After just a few minutes, panic broke out among the Americans. All of them lay in the calm, cold water; some tried to get to the nearest beach obstacles."

"Poor swine," muttered Oberleutnant Frerking.

The few Americans who tried to return fire had little to aim at. Many German machine guns were positioned so that their field of fire ran across the beach. When the Americans rushed forward, they could rarely see where the murderous volleys against them were coming from. Severloh, on the other hand, had to constantly prioritise from the many targets he could hit with his machine gun:

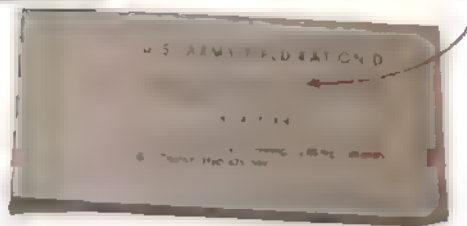
"The landing craft were now coming on in waves, a great swarm in an irregular formation. There was a break and then the next wave came. As the boats approached, I concentrated on the ramps. As soon as they came down for the GIs to jump out, I began to fire."

The invasion unfolded according to a strict timetable. Three minutes after the first infantry wave, engineer troops were to be landed, and 30 minutes into the attack, the next infantry wave would join the higher-ranking officers. More troops and tanks, guns, anti-aircraft units and all sorts of other units had their exact time of arrival noted in the orderly battle plan. But ►



The so-called Ration D, which consisted of chocolate, was in US soldiers' pockets on D-Day.

The chocolate was deliberately made not to taste good. The soldiers were only supposed to eat it when they genuinely needed extra energy.



06.30

The beach remains untouched after the failed bombardment, and the first attack wave is mowed down.

12.00

For hours, US soldiers are caught in crossfire on the beach. Only at midday do they break through with supporting fire from destroyers.

17.00

The last German *Widerstandsnest* – resistance nest – falls. Three hours later, all German resistance has been crushed.



At Pointe du Hoc, elite US troops breached a 30-metre-high rock wall to neutralise a strategically important German position.

"Some German opened up on the side of the LCT with his machine gun, blblblblang. That convinced me. Into the water I dove". ■ George Ryan, US corporal.

everything turned to chaos as soon as Severloh and the other German machine gunners pulled their triggers:

"With the tide rising, the landing craft came ever closer to the edge of the beach. Quite a lot of them, some half sunken, drifted as wrecks on the waves. The GIs tried to find cover behind the beach obstacles, which still towered above the waves, or corpses of their fallen comrades, which were washing up and down. Often, we could only see their heads and their helmets. After the landing craft had offloaded their living cargo on to the beach, they withdrew. Until the next wave arrived, I fired at everything which moved in the water and on the beach. I sometimes used my carbine, since I could fire aimed shots at individual soldiers and at the time give my machine gun a chance to cool down."

The high tide was coming in, making landings even more difficult. US engineering troops should have

blasted corridors through the many barricades the Germans had filled the beach with, but despite sticking grimly to their task, only a few managed to complete the task amid enormous losses.

Artillerymen abandoned their guns

Omaha Beach was a harrowing sight for the incoming troops. Destroyed landing craft littered the beach, bodies drifted at the water's edge, and helpless soldiers clung to anything still sticking out of the water. The noise was deafening. Corporal George Ryan was part of a battery of four M-7s – self-propelled guns – being ferried aboard a LCT (Landing Craft, Tank). The skipper selected a spot on the beach where German fire seemed less murderous, but on the way in, the vessel ran aground and got stuck.

"Every man for himself," the battery commander instantly shouted and threw himself over the side as

Omaha was a fortress

German General Erwin Rommel had seen what the Allied air force could do in North Africa, and he believed that the battle for France should be fought on the beach, where the enemy would be at its most vulnerable. When Rommel was put in charge of building the Atlantic Wall in the spring of 1944, he quickly realised that he didn't have enough troops to place effective forces along its entire length. Therefore, he decided to augment its defences with barbed wire, mines and bunkers so that a smaller force of soldiers could delay the attackers while German reserves rushed forward from waiting areas inland.



US troops could only slowly penetrate the defences at Omaha.

Omaha Beach
FRANCE



1 Landing craft had to be destroyed

The Germans expected the Allies to land at high tide, when the distance from the water's edge to their defences was at its shortest. Therefore, they fortified the beach with Belgian gates, ramps, mined poles and Czech hedgehogs to destroy the landing craft as they brought in soldiers. In reality, the Allies attacked at low tide so they could see the defences, which could also be used to take cover behind.



Ramps

Belgian gates

Corporal Ryan and the rest of the men gaped. "Holy smokes, he was just gone," Ryan said. "We lowered the ramp. Everybody in the first M 7 took a deep breath and they gave it the gun, down the ramp they went and into the water. The thing almost disappeared from sight, but the driver gave it the gun and broom, right out of the water it came."

The next gun, however, sank below the surface and its crew had to swim to shore. The rest of the gunners realised they had to abandon their guns and started jumping into the water. Ryan hesitated, however. He couldn't swim. So first he ripped off his armour and inflated his life jacket before edging down the ramp with nervous steps. Then he was compelled to jump:

"Some German opened up on the side of the LCT with his machine gun, bibbliblang. That convinced me. Into the water I dove. I pushed with all my might and then I started going, I'm

swimming and I'm swimming. Somebody taps me on the shoulder and I look up. I was in a foot of water, swimming. You talk about the will to live. If they hadn't stopped me I would have swam two miles inland."

Corporal Ryan made it across the beach and took cover behind the wall. There, troops from a wide variety of units were mixed together. Infantrymen shared shelter with tank crew, engineers, gunners and even staff with typewriters, all just trying to survive. However, no one behind the sea wall was safe. They had some protection from German machine-gun fire, but their shelter didn't shield them from the mortar shells raining down from above.

US commander couldn't act

Off the coast was the US cruiser USS *Augusta*, which was the command centre for General Omar ►

2 Wall protected the soldiers

A low wall in the centre of Omaha Beach existed before the war. Here, US soldiers sought cover from German machine guns, but in turn became easy targets for mortars.

3 Barbed wire was impenetrable

The barbed wire was attached to poles and virtually impossible for Allied soldiers to penetrate without blowing their way through.

4 Bunkers were perfectly positioned

German bunkers and machine-gun positions were set up so that any point on the beach could be caught in the crossfire. The defences were also surrounded by minefields, so even if the enemy broke through the line, he could only advance slowly.

Mined
poles

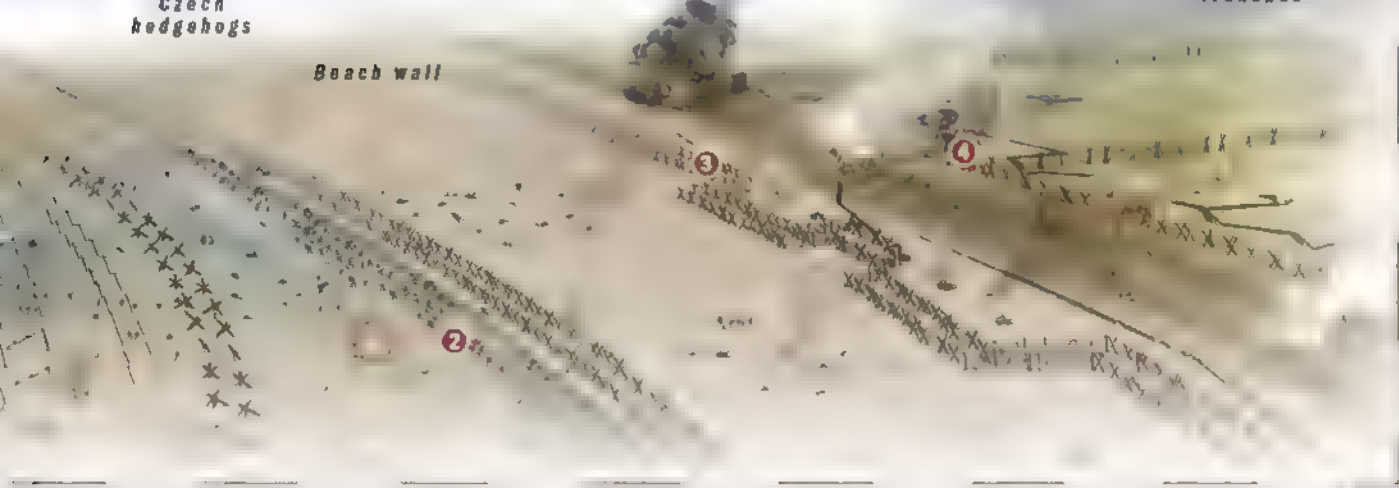
Czech
hedgehogs

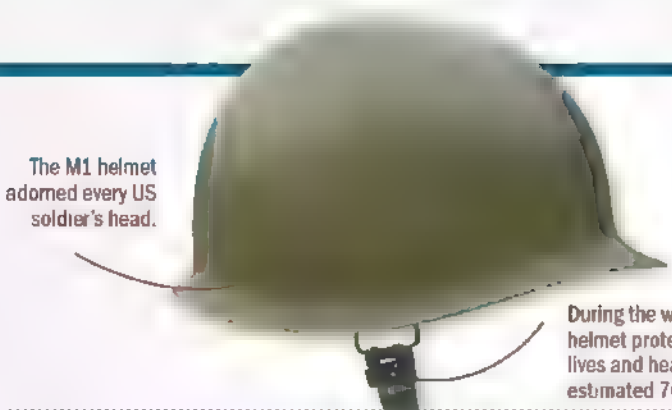
Beach wall

Concrete
bunker

Barbed wire

Trenches





The M1 helmet adorned every US soldier's head.

During the war, the helmet protected the lives and health of an estimated 70,000 men

Bradley, commanding all US troops on D-Day. He stood on the bridge with his binoculars over his eyes and cotton wool in his ears to muffle the sound of the ship's roaring 203-mm guns. Positive reports were coming in from the invasion beach of Utah, but Bradley knew little about the situation on Omaha Beach:

"The whole of D day was for me a time of grave personal anxiety and frustration. I was stuck on the Augusta. Our communications with the forces assaulting Omaha Beach were thin to non-existent. From the few radio messages that we overheard and the first-hand reports of observers in small craft reconnoitring close to shore, I gained the impression that our forces had suffered an irreversible catastrophe, that there was little hope we could force the beach. Privately, I considered evacuating the beachhead and directing the follow-up troops to Utah Beach or the British beaches."

Bradley and the Allied commander, General Eisenhower, knew before the invasion that the attack on Omaha Beach would be risky. The coastline formed a semi-arc, so incoming landing craft could be fired on from both sides, and the steep slope behind the beach left few avenues for Allied vehicles to manoeuvre. Added to this were the German defences. A young British officer had sneaked ashore around New Year's Day, and his report had been ominous:

"I think that your beach with all these tremendous emplacements with guns deflading the beaches from here and there and all over, it's going to be a very tough proposition indeed."

At the time, Bradley had quietly patted the Briton on the shoulder: *"I know, my boy, I know."*

Yet this potential death trap had to be stormed for strategic reasons. Forty kilometres and the Vire and Taute rivers separated the more obvious invasion beaches of the British to the east from the Americans' Utah to the west. If they weren't united shortly after landing, the Germans would have the chance to surround the troops in small beachheads at the very edge of the sea. The Allies could not utilise their vast superiority in soldiers and equipment if they lacked the space to land their forces. Omaha Beach lay

between the other invasion beaches, so the troops had to be landed there at all costs.

By now, there was every indication that the risky landing was about to fail. But while Bradley considered evacuating those in distress on Omaha Beach, he knew it wasn't possible. The soldiers on the beach were stuck. There were no landing craft waiting to get them out, so if he abandoned Omaha Beach, the troops would have to fend for themselves. Perhaps they could later be rescued from the shore.

Little did Bradley know that the decision had already been made for him. Two hours after the first wave had landed, the naval officer in charge of the landing itself had ordered traffic to the beach to stop. Smashed wrecks, half-sunk vehicles and German shelling made entry impossible. A confused mass of vessels now swarmed out to sea, and aboard *Augusta*, Bradley dithered. The battle for Omaha Beach was being lost.

Rangers received baptism of fire

While a bloody fiasco loomed on Omaha Beach, a very different battle raged a few kilometres further west. At the top of the 30-metre-high rocky outcrop of Pointe du Hoc, the Germans had set up six 155-mm guns captured from the French back in 1940. From this high point, the guns could fire out over the sea in front of the two US invasion beaches.

The task of silencing them was given to the elite Rangers – the US equivalent of the British commandos. Like their British counterparts, the unit was created and trained for dangerous special operations that required surprise, ingenuity and agility. Lieutenant Colonel James Earl Rudder led three companies of Rangers, 68 men in each, sailing towards Pointe du Hoc. Behind them were four DUKWs – floating trucks – carrying telescopic ladders from the London Fire Brigade. The Rangers would use them to reach the top of the cliff.

Here, too, the men encountered problems. Two of the landing craft sank, and navigational problems delayed the rest of the special forces by 35 minutes. As

AT THE SAME TIME

GERMANY:


- Hitler slept until noon and ate a good lunch before responding to the news from Normandy

ROMANIA:

- The Red Army's first offensive against Germany's ally fails

YUGOSLAVIA:

- Germany abandoned attempts to capture Yugoslavian resistance leader Josip Tito



a result, the sun came up and the Germans could see the soldiers arriving. A DUKW was sunk by a shell before the vessels reached the shingle beach at the foot of the cliff, now just a few metres wide as the tide came in. As the soldiers poured out, 15 men were immediately hit by volleys from a German machine gun. A British colonel who had accompanied the force, however, strolled around unconcerned and shouted encouragement. The Americans couldn't understand how he avoided being hit, but the Briton had an explanation of his own:

"I take two short steps and three long ones, and they always miss me."

A moment later, however, he was knocked down by a shot to the helmet.

The officer jumped back up and swung a threatening fist at the machine gun:

"You dirty son of a bitch."

After the direct hit, the colonel reverted to crawling like the Americans. The shingle on the

beach slipped under the three amphibious vehicles and only one of them could get into position to raise its telescopic ladder. A sergeant named Stivison took a machine gun with him as he made the climb. His fight against the Germans at the top was a farcical sight, according to a lieutenant watching from below:

"The ladder was swaying at about a 45-degree angle - both ways. Stivison would fire short bursts as he passed over the cliff at the top of the arch, but the DUKW floundered so badly that they had to bring the fire ladder back down."

The Americans' only alternative to the ladder were rocket guns, which could fire ropes with grappling hooks at the end to the top. But making it to the top that way seemed hopeless.

Cannons were missing

Each landing craft at Pointe du Hoc had brought six rocket guns with grappling hooks. But the ropes they were tied to had been saturated in seawater and become so heavy that most of the hooks didn't even reach the edge of the cliff top. Other ropes were cut by the Germans above.

The Rangers had only a few lines left, which were so slippery that the soldiers had a hard time getting up, even if they were experienced climbers. Private Sigurd Sundby made the attempt:

"I went up about, I don't know, 40, 50 feet. The rope was wet and kind of muddy. My hands just ▶

No bomb craters were to be found on Omaha Beach. Therefore, the Americans could only take cover by a low stone wall on the beach.

Landing hit a bump in the road

Almost no one in the first wave of attacks landed where they were supposed to on Omaha Beach. Wind, currents and lack of experience led several US landing craft astray and the soldiers landed in large clumps.

The difference between high and low tide is six metres on the French side of the English Channel. The Allies wanted to land at low tide, so they commissioned the world's leading experts to make accurate calculations of high and low tide times. In return, the Allies paid little attention to the current that occurs at Omaha when the massive amounts of water move. Low tide on Omaha Beach was at 05.25, and at that time the current was traveling east at a speed of 2.7 knots

(5 km/h). Added to this was the wind from the north-west, which at 5-9 m/s was stronger than expected.

The combination created waves of around one metre, which pushed the landing craft westwards. The flat bottom of the boats meant that they were also easily moved by the wind itself, which pushed hard against the sides of the vessels. If the coxswains were to guide their landing craft to the right place, they had to adjust their course based on experience and

instinct, because they approached while it was still dark, so the sailors couldn't steer by points on land. However, experience was not in abundance among the young men the US Navy assigned to man the landing crafts. The results were disastrous. The boats were drawn to the same spots on the beach far from their targets, while most of the soldiers landed in clusters instead of scattered across the beach. The Germans could therefore effectively concentrate their fire on the large groups of soldiers.

The ocean currents at Omaha Beach are particularly treacherous due to the strong tides. They claimed the lives of several Americans.



As we rushed [towards him] the lone German operating the gun threw up his hands and yelled, 'Kamerad.' ■ John Spaulding, US lieutenant.

couldn't hold, they were like grease, and I came sliding back down. As I was going down, I wrapped my foot around the rope and slowed myself up as much as I could, but still I burned my hands. If the rope hadn't been so wet, I wouldn't have been able to hang on for the burning.

"I landed right beside Sweeney there, and he says, 'What's the matter, Sundby, chicken? Let me – I'll show you how to climb.' So he went up first and I was right up after him, and when I got to the top, Sweeney says, 'Hey, Sundby, don't forget to zigzag.'"

The Germans fired at anything that moved. But the defenders were trapped, because although the point was well fortified, all the positions faced inland. No one had imagined that an attack would come up the vertical cliff.

What's more, the Rangers were able to find good cover because the whole point was pitted with craters. Allied bombs from planes and naval shells had devastated the area so thoroughly that nothing looked the same as it had on aerial photographs.

Guns were 1.5 kilometres away

The German gun bunkers turned out to be unmanned. In fact, most of them hadn't even been completed yet, and none of them contained guns. While construction was taking place, the Germans had moved the French guns 1.5 kilometres inland.

Lieutenant Colonel Rudder knew this from reports sent by French resistance fighters. But the Rangers were sent in anyway because they were also tasked with attacking another gun battery 2.5 kilometres further west.

Afterwards, their task would be to block the coastal road for German reinforcements on their way to Omaha Beach. However, Rudder had chosen to hide news of the missing guns from his men before the landing, because he didn't want to demoralise them. A lieutenant was one of the many Rangers who felt dejected at the sight of the half-finished bunkers, particularly given the losses they had incurred capturing the cliff:

"At this stage we felt rather disappointed, not only disappointed but I felt awfully lonesome as I realised how few men we had there."

The original 200 men had now dwindled to a small force and no reinforcements were on the way. The second attack wave of 550 men had been landed on Omaha Beach before word of Pointe du Hoc's capture reached them. The remnants of the first wave could not continue the advance but had to settle for blocking the coastal road.

A few kilometres from Pointe du Hoc, the Germans had discovered that the flow of enemy landing craft into Omaha Beach had stopped. The Americans who had already landed stayed under cover, and Private

Heinrich Severloh suddenly had time to look around and assess the situation:

"For the first time I realised how many dead had been washed up on the beach below by the high waves and rising tide in our sector. On a stretch of beach about 300m long and several metres wide lay hundreds upon hundreds of lifeless bodies of American soldiers, in places several on top of each other. The wounded moved slowly in the blood soaked water, most of them crawled, to the edge of the beach where there was an embankment about one and half metres high, to find shelter behind it."

However, the situation was not as clearly contained as Severloh thought. In some places, shell-shocked Americans had found gaps in the defences and started climbing the slopes. Widerstandsnetz 62 and the other similar resistance nests had been constructed where roads or paths led down to the flat beach, but in the spaces between them only scattered German positions had been built.

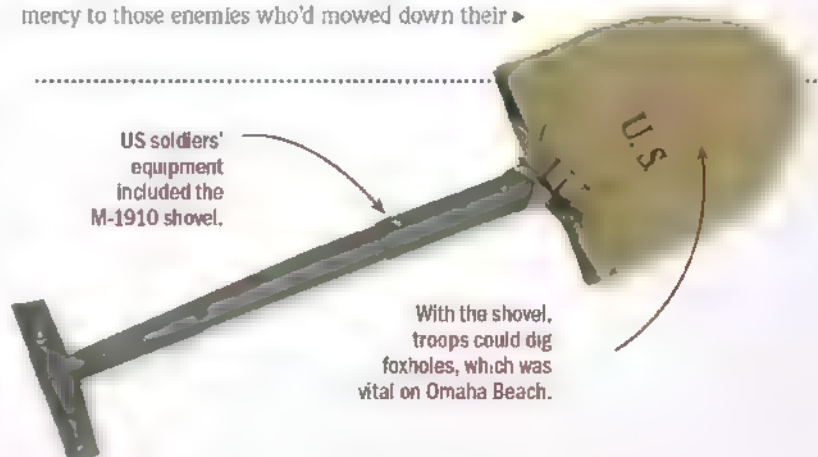
Italian veteran broke through

Lieutenant John Spaulding led a platoon of the 16th Regiment, which attacked the eastern half of Omaha Beach. Unlike the 116th Regiment to the west, which was in combat for the first time that morning, the 16th Regiment had been on the front lines in North Africa and Italy. Spaulding was also lucky that his platoon landed in the right place, losing only a few men as they made their way across the beach.

The soldiers climbed over the sea wall without stopping. On the other side was a German minefield, but a faint trail showed where the Germans used to come through. Soon the Americans had reached the cliff, where a German machine gun opened fire on them. Several were hit and Spaulding ordered a full-frontal assault:

"As we rushed it the lone German operating the gun threw up his hands and yelled, 'Kamerad.' We needed prisoners for interrogating so I ordered the men not to shoot."

In many other cases, the Americans showed no mercy to those enemies who'd mowed down their



Two kinds of people are staying on this beach, the dead and those who are going to die. Now let's get the hell out of here. ■ Norman Cota, US brigadier general.

comrades on the beach. Spaulding's prisoner turned out to be a Pole. In addition to Germans, the defence force on Omaha Beach included conscripts from Polish territories that Hitler had annexed. They obeyed orders to fight, but when the Americans came close, some were known to even shoot their own sergeant before surrendering.

Spaulding's platoon continued through the dunes, attacking the positions they found. Along the way, the lieutenant made a basic mistake that nearly cost him his life. He'd lost his rifle during the landing and later took another from a soldier. But in the heat of battle, he'd forgotten to check the weapon.

"I ran into a Kraut and pulled the trigger, but the safety was on. I reached for the safety catch and hit the clip release, so my clip hit the ground. I ran about 50 yards in nothing flat. Fortunately, Sergeant Peterson had me covered and the German put up his hands. That business of not checking guns is certainly not habit forming."

Spaulding and his men were among the first to reach the cliff, but more were to follow. And slowly, the situation on the beach started to turn.

General stormed the Germans

On the western part of the beach, the commander of the 116th Regiment landed about an hour after the first wave of attacks. With him arrived Brigadier General Norman Cota, second in command of the 29th Division, to which the regiment belonged. On their way in, they were fired upon, killing several members of the regimental staff.

Cota made it to the sea wall in one piece. As a brigadier general, it wasn't his job to yell orders at the men sheltering there, but someone had to set them in motion. And no American on Omaha Beach outranked him. He began assembling people into improvised units:

"Two kinds of people are staying on this beach, the dead and those who are going to die. Now let's get the hell out of here."

Several soldiers later recalled how the brigadier general brought survivors out of their state of shock so they could act like soldiers again. He told them to forget all the carefully laid plans that had failed. Instead of storming the exit from the beach at the village of Vierville, where the German positions had proved too strong, they were to push up the slope like Lieutenant Spaulding's platoon further east. Later, they would capture the exit from the rear. One officer saw how Cota got the attack going again:

"Exposing himself to enemy fire, General Cota went over the sea wall giving encouragement, directions and orders to those about him, personally supervised the placing of a BAR, and brought fire to bear on some of the enemy positions on the bluff that faced them. Finding a

belt of barbed wire inside the sea wall, General Cota personally supervised placing a bangalore torpedo for blowing the wire and was one of the first three men to go through the wire."

At this point the general came across a group of Rangers. They were from the second attack wave, which should have been launched at Pointe du Hoc if the all clear signal had been sent in time. Instead, they had ended up in the chaos of Omaha Beach.

"We're counting on you Rangers to lead the way," Cota informed the newly arrived force.

The words *"Rangers lead the way"* have been the motto of the elite unit ever since. In fact, small groups from the 116th Regiment were already on the cliff, but the Rangers were the first full platoons to cross the sea wall and head upwards. Soldiers from various shattered units followed, and even sailors from wrecked landing craft ran with them.

Ship guns cleaned up the cliff

As the US troops broke down their defences, the German fire weakened. The tanks on the beach had taken a beating, but some were still battleworthy, and they used their 75-mm guns to silence German weapons. Naval guns also helped – not the heavy guns of battleships, which were fired at long range and risked hitting the US troops, but those from the destroyers, which could get closer to shore thanks to their shallower draught, enabling them to fire targeted shots at German positions.

The captain of the destroyer USS *McCook* was the first to take the initiative and move his ship close to Vierville two hours after the first wave of attacks. Through the smoke, the ship's observers could see several bunkers and two German guns in positions up on the cliff, from which they could fire down the coast. Volleys from *McCook*'s five 127-mm guns caused one of the German guns to crash on to the beach, silencing the other. The commander of the warships off Omaha Beach ordered the ten other destroyers to follow suit. A soldier stared in amazement as a warship quickly approached:

"It seemed to be out of control and heading right for the beach. I thought, my God, they're going to run aground and be disabled right in front of the German emplacement, when the ship made a hard left pulling parallel to the beach, blazing away with every gun it had point blank at the position. Puffs of smoke and mounds of dirt flew everywhere on the hillside as the destroyer passed swiftly by."

The ships had no contact with observers on land who could feed them targets. The gunnery officer on the destroyer USS *Frankford* came up with another way to find the Germans' positions:

"A tank sitting at the water's edge with a broken track fired at something on the hill. We immediately followed up with a 5-inch salvo. The

FACTS

Allied casualty figures on Omaha Beach are subject to great uncertainty, as it was only practicable to make a count several days after the landing. It's possible up to

5,000

Allied soldiers died on Omaha Beach. The Germans lost around 1,200 men



tank gunner flipped open his hatch, looked around at us, waved, dropped back in the tank, and fired at another target. For the next few minutes he was our fire-control party."

McCooke even managed to capture enemy soldiers. After a fierce bombardment, German soldiers in one position began waving white flags. Through semaphore messages in broken German, the men on land managed to understand that they should head down the slope and surrender to US soldiers. Heavy shelling from the front and advancing troops on the cliffs everywhere pressurised the German resistance nests at the beach exits. After the critical first hours, the battle for Omaha Beach was turning, and at 13.30, General Omar Bradley received a message that the Americans were finally advancing.

Ran out of ammunition and hope

For Private Heinrich Severloh, the slaughter of Americans was nearing its end. After 8,000 rounds, he was running out of ammunition and had only tracer projectiles left. The green glow of the shots travelling through the air revealed his location to everyone nearby, and American shells were soon crashing down around

him. Off to the side, he could see enemies moving up the slopes. The Americans were breaking through the defences and if he stayed at his post, he would soon have them behind him. Severloh ran. He leaped from shell hole to shell hole, keeping low from flying projectiles, until he reached the road behind his position. Four hundred metres down the road he stopped, hoping to meet others from WS 62. Only one turned up

"He was disoriented and, out of breath, told me that the others were all dead and somehow he had succeeded in getting through."

The two continued to flee, joining other refugees from decimated units. Machine gun fire forced them to take cover in a low lying area where Severloh spent the night.

"Now deep resignation took over me: was the whole struggle, the personal sacrifice, the enormous use of physical and mental strength, the fear, the pain and the terrible killing all for nothing? I thought too of Frerking and felt tears well up in my eyes and run warmly down my swollen face. Now it was all over."

The next morning, Severloh was captured by the Americans. After the war, many US soldiers

Endless rows of white crosses stand near Omaha Beach. A total of 9,387 Americans who lost their lives in Normandy are buried in the beachside churchyard.

remembered the comrades they lost on D Day. Often men they had trained and lived with ever since they put on their uniforms. But most were a so proud of their role on 6th June 1944. Charles Sullivan of the US Navy was on the beach clearing barricades and he never forgot it:

"In 28 years of service, three wars, 14 overseas tours of duty, thousands of faces, only Normandy and D Day remain vivid, as if it happened only yesterday. What we did was important and worthwhile, and how many ever get to say that about a day in their lives?"

Exact casualty figures for the bloody landing are unknown. The units were split into small groups and it was several days before the chaos had subsided to the point where a count made sense. In the meantime, even more had been killed, wounded or gone

missing. The most reliable estimates range from 2,000 to 5,000 men.

Victory was not yet assured

General Omar Bradley and the other commanders knew that Omaha Beach was the most difficult of the Normandy invasion beaches to attack. They chose to send soldiers ashore anyway because not doing so could cause major strategic problems.

None of the generals' concerns were apparent as the operational objectives were written into the grand battle plan for D-Day. At Omaha Beach, the invasion troops were to storm the fortified beach exits and then proceed 8 km inland before darkness settled over the battle zone. Expectations had now proved hopelessly optimistic. At sunset on D-Day, battles still raged on Omaha Beach. The Germans continued to hold a few

After the landings,
Allied men and materiel
poured on to the five
invasion beaches. A total
of two million men and
half a million vehicles
were put ashore in the
months that followed.



beachfront positions, and behind the shore, fresh troops stood close enough to the beach exits that the Americans were still fenced in. Troops that were already scheduled to be ashore had to wait for their transport ships to find room for them on the beach.

To the west at Pointe du Hoc, the US Rangers' situation was critical. They were surrounded and fighting for their lives as ammunition ran out and the wounded were left with nothing but the most basic treatment. It wasn't until two days after the invasion that the Americans managed to come to their rescue. The commander of the German 352nd Infantry Division remained cautiously optimistic as night fell on 6th June. He

signalled up the chain of command that he could prevent the Americans from expanding their beachhead if he could get reinforcements.

But no troops came to the rescue. Instead, all the reserves were sent to the coast further east, where the British and Canadians began landing an hour after the first wave reached Omaha Beach. German high command considered this new attack a greater threat than the captured American troops, who had only gained a small foothold on French soil. ■





BRITISH FOUGHT TO GET ASHORE

There was only
one way forward.

British tank commander Howard Johnston on the D-Day advance

British sector 6th June 1944

N.I.S. GALVADOS N.I.S.

CAEN

ON 11 DEC, THE BRITISH
ARMY ENTERED CAEN.
THE CITY WAS
RECEIVED BY THE
FRENCH POPULATION.

British fought to get ashore

At 07.30 on 6th June 1944, the first British troops landed on Normandy's beaches. Four years of preparation had preceded them, and with the men came tanks in all shapes and sizes. Some floated, some cleared minefields, some climbed, some blasted out fire, and all pushed forward. The battle was on.

By Esben Møller Kjær

At the British invasion beaches of Juno, Gold and Sword, D Day began two days before the first soldier set foot in Normandy. From a periscope on his mini submarine X23, Captain George Honour looked with curiosity at the beaches towards which he would be leading British invasion craft in two days' time. The contrast with the battles that were soon to follow couldn't have been greater. Captain Honour observed German soldiers living the good life just hours before the Allied invasion. While their countrymen fought bitterly on the Eastern Front, the occupying troops in France were enjoying the sunshine, wine and friendly French girls.

"There were lorry loads of Germans coming down to the beach and playing beach ball and swimming. They were having their Sunday make and mends [time off duty], coming down, lorry loads, having a lovely time. We were saying, 'Little do they know.'"

Honour and four other Brits had already spent two days in the cramped hull of the submarine. When the large Allied fleet arrived, they would lead the way to the invasion beach code-named Sword, while a sister sub was ready to do the same at Juno, further west. At midnight, X23 surfaced to let in fresh air and receive the day's radio communications. "Your aunt is riding a bicycle today," the coded message read. The invasion had been postponed for 24 hours and, frustrated, Honour had to submerge the submarine again and wait.

"We didn't like this 24 hour bit. We didn't know about the oxygen, how these damned bottles were

getting on. Whether they were half empty or nearly empty."

Only a certain type of man could stand to serve in those cramped vessels. It was cold, wet and stuffy on board. Just two men at a time could attempt to sleep in the tiny bunks, and the rest had nothing to do.

After almost 24 hours at the bottom of the English Channel, Honour took his submarine back up again, and at 05.00 on the morning of 6th June, the crew aboard the mini submarine raised a 5.5-metre mast with a green light at the top that could only be seen from the open sea. At the same time, George Honour activated a signal that ships equipped with sonar could pick up. The invasion was underway.

"Gradually in the distance you could make out the bigger ships and then the smaller ones, the destroyers, and then all hell broke loose ... Suddenly my cap was whisked off by one of those LCTs [landing craft tanks] firing about 1,000 rockets. The [amphibious DD tanks] just poured off those LCTs ... [T]hey set off and made a line abreast and they all set off in line with the shore. As they passed us, we cheered them and they cheered us. That was our job done, then."

British bet on new weapons

The task for which the crew of X23 had helped prepare had been years in the planning. On 6th June 1944, 83,000 British soldiers were heading towards three beaches in Normandy, but as early as 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill had established the Combined Operations Headquarters, which planned

During the morning, the British beaches had already been secured and reinforcements could march peacefully ashore with their gear.





landing operations and developed the weapons and tools to carry them out. For the British, the invasion wasn't just about brute force and air supremacy – it was just as much about ingenuity and crazy but cutting-edge weaponry, a strategy that would prove both effective and capable of saving thousands of lives. In the past four years, some of the empire's most talented engineers had developed amphibious tanks with canvas hulls, new landing craft, tanks with flamethrowers and long ladders mounted on top, and lots of other war materiel that looked like something out of a comic book.

The ingenuity was partly born out of necessity. Britain's army had always been small, and when sent to war on mainland Europe, the generals' main task was to avoid casualties. They had to play it safe rather than risk everything in bold operations that could lead to great victories, but also disastrous defeats. The problem was greater than ever in 1944, because Britain was running out of soldiers. Five years of war had almost exhausted the pool of able-bodied men, and by the summer, casualties could no longer be replaced. Churchill was wary of a large-scale, dangerous invasion of mainland France, therefore, and instead suggested invasions in the Balkans or Portugal, a reinforced effort

in Italy, or anything except a frontal assault on the strong German forces in northern France. But the Americans wouldn't budge. They had twice as many soldiers as the British, plus the ability to recruit more, and they wanted to go for Hitler's jugular. Churchill had to give in, even though he was still complaining to his chief of staff, Alan Brooke, in February.

Empire's last push

Despite his initial scepticism, Churchill's fighting spirit began to take hold as D-Day approached. In turn, his chief of staff, General Brooke, retained his pessimism, about which he confided to his diary as late as 5th June 1944, the night before the invasion:

"I am very uneasy about the whole operation. At the best it will fall so very, very far short of the expectation of the bulk of the people ... At the worst it may well be the most ghastly disaster of the whole war."

Brooke's nerves were understandable. The British contributed by far the most ships, and together with the Canadians, they would land the most troops. They were responsible for the invasion of three beaches, Gold, Juno and Sword, against the Americans' Utah and Omaha. D-Day was very much a British ►

The beaches in the British sector were flat and large transport ships could move in with the tide on to the sand to land tanks and other equipment.



Invasion had a sixth beach

In US President Franklin Roosevelt's map room was a top-secret map showing the plans for D-Day. The president's map surprisingly showed six invasion beaches; the history books only mention five.

During the planning of D-Day, British admirals were concerned about German guns east of the invasion beaches. There were several heavy batteries that could fire upon Allied ships and British soldiers during the crucial hours of D-Day. Therefore, the Allied army leadership planned to land soldiers on a sixth – unknown – beach called

Band. Historians are now aware of this because after D-Day, US President Franklin D Roosevelt handed over his personal maps to US archives.

According to the plan, the attack on Band was to take place at 00.30 on 7th June 1944, the night after D-Day. The targets were the batteries at Houlgate and

Benerville, both of which were armed with old French 155-mm guns, the same type that US Rangers struck at Pointe du Hoc. Late on D-Day, British commandos were ready to launch the assault and destroy the batteries to protect the British flank, but the Royal Navy deemed the attack no longer necessary.

Band Beach

On Roosevelt's private map, historians have discovered a sixth invasion beach called Band. It lay east of Sword and also east of the Caen Canal and the River Orne.

Threat from two batteries

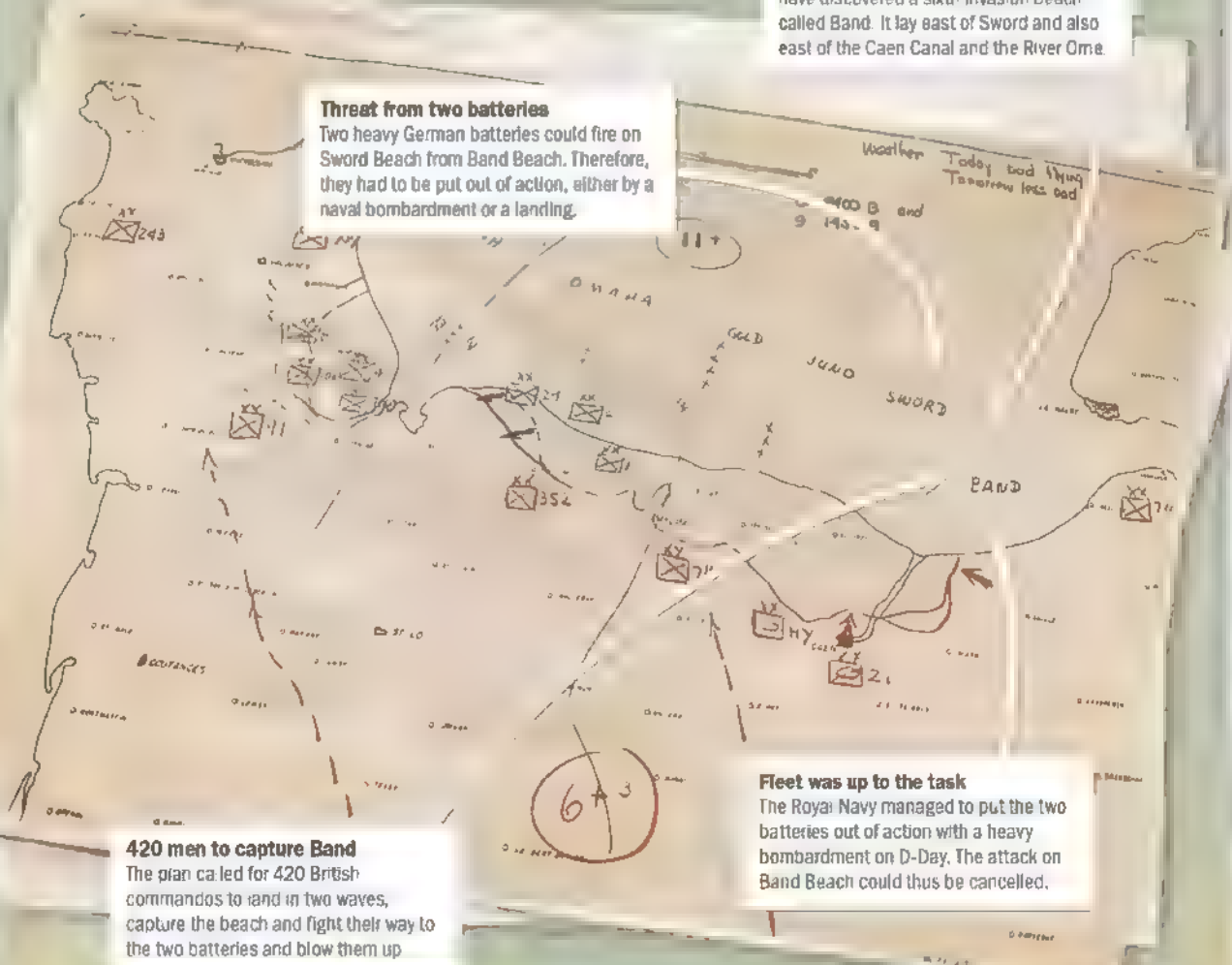
Two heavy German batteries could fire on Sword Beach from Band Beach. Therefore, they had to be put out of action, either by a naval bombardment or a landing.

420 men to capture Band

The plan called for 420 British commandos to land in two waves, capture the beach and fight their way to the two batteries and blow them up.

Fleet was up to the task

The Royal Navy managed to put the two batteries out of action with a heavy bombardment on D-Day. The attack on Band Beach could thus be cancelled.



operation and was to be the empire's final push before the United States, with its superior forces, took full control of the defeat of the Third Reich.

Even as the *X20* and *X23* mini submarines headed for the open sea, counter attacks hit the invasion fleet. A flotilla of German torpedo boats left Le Havre east of Gold, Sword and Juno at 05.37, and thanks to a smokescreen the Allies themselves had laid, the German ships sneaked up on the landing craft off the invasion beach of Sword. Only one of their many torpedoes hit a target, however, when a direct hit sank the Norwegian destroyer *Svenner*. The captain of the nearby Polish destroyer *Slazak* saw the attack up close from his position in the invasion fleet:

"A flash of explosion occurred amidships, followed by the sound of detonation and then the burst of fire and smoke that shot high into the air. Svenner broke amidship and sank."

Thirty-two Norwegians and one Briton perished and became the first victims of the British part of the invasion. In revenge for the attack, a British battleship sent one of the torpedo boats to the seabed before the rest fled back to Le Havre.

Veterans from Africa led the way

Svenner was one of only two warships lost on D-Day. Allied admirals had expected much stiffer German resistance, but the invasion fleet was able to approach the coast relatively undisturbed. As was US Captain Anthony Duke, who was serving in the Royal Navy on the day and commanded a landing ship carrying 600 British soldiers, six landing craft, tanks, lorries and jeeps. This type of boat was large enough to cross the Atlantic under its own power, yet was able to get

right up to the beach so vehicles could roll straight down the bow ramp.

The university educated Duke was aware that in those minutes he and his passengers were participating in a historic moment. He grabbed a microphone to say some words that were appropriate and bombastic enough to capture the magnificence of the moment. Phrases from Shakespeare's battlefield monologues in the play *Henry V* filled his head until a British colonel placed a hand on his shoulder:

"Careful, young fellow. Most of my men have seen the worst of desert warfare and a good many of them were in France and evacuated through Dunkirk. So I'd advise you to go easy, go quick, and don't get dramatic or emotional."

Duke therefore contented himself with a few practical messages. On another landing craft, however, the commander of a company of Yorkshiremen did not hold back. He had also selected some appropriate lines from *Henry V*:

"On, on, you noble English! Whose blood is fet from fathers of war proof... Be copy now to men of grosser blood and teach them how to war! The game's afoot: follow your spirit."

The words were grandiose, but the British soldiers were indeed following in the footsteps of great units that had fought everywhere from Hastings to Waterloo. And that day, some of the British Army's most experienced units would lead the invasion. General Bernard Montgomery, who commanded all Allied army units on D-Day, refused to take chances with untested divisions, like the Americans did. Instead, he brought in the best of his old troops from the North African campaign. Their professionalism, ►

President of the USA, Franklin D Roosevelt, and Britain's Winston Churchill discussing the plans for the Allied invasion.





along with the specially developed war materiel, would ensure a successful landing, and before sunset, Montgomery intended to capture the city of Caen, 15 kilometres from the coast.

Tide had to rise

The British and Canadian invasions began an hour after the first wave of US soldiers reached the beach at Omaha. The tide came in later in the British sector and the sea had to rise slightly for the landing craft to sail over the tricky rocky outcrops on the seabed. The mini submarines had been sent ahead to mark safe routes towards the beaches between the rocks.

The later landing by the British had advantages and disadvantages. The extra hour meant that battleships, cruisers and destroyers had more time to bombard the German bunkers. On the other hand, German obstacles and booby traps were now partially flooded, putting the landing craft at risk of running into them. The navy had issued guidance calling for vigour rather than caution:

"Hedgehogs, stakes or tetrahedra will not prevent your beaching provided you go flat out. Your craft will crunch over them, bend them and squash them into the sand and the damage to your outer bottom can be accepted. So drive on."

However, the obstacle known as Element C, or Belgian gate, had to be taken seriously. A vertical lattice structure faced the sea and was reinforced with heavy steel struts to prevent the barrier from toppling over in a collision. Allied helmsmen had to try to steer around it or hit it on the edge, pushing the lattice aside or knocking it askew.

In the invasion plan, the calculation was that German blockades, shore fire and accidents would destroy 10 per cent and damage 20 per cent of the Allied landing craft. On the Canadian beach Juno, the figures reached as high as 25 per cent destroyed and 50 per cent damaged, but the navy's instructions to the captains were:

"Do not worry too much about how you are to get out again. The first and primary object is to get in and land without drowning the vehicles."

Some German barriers were designed to simply stand in the way or rip up the bottom of a landing craft that sailed over them at high tide. Others were mounted with anti-tank mines loaded with 5.5 kg of explosives. On D-Day, the charge proved too small to sink the Brits' large landing craft, but it caused damage to the boats' ramps. In contrast, the British small landing craft Landing Craft Assault (LCA), which carried up to 36 soldiers, was less robust. As 14 of them sailed the 47 Royal Marine Commando special forces towards Gold Beach, five were sunk by German mines. One lieutenant experienced the mines' effects first hand.

"My landing craft hit a mine and I was knocked unconscious for a while. When I woke up, I found myself in the water. I had a broken leg and a broken arm and attempted to swim ashore but only ended up

going around in circles. A sergeant saw me and despite the awfulness of the situation said, 'You won't get anywhere fast like that, Sir. You had better think of something better.' I eventually made it ashore where my MOA [Marine Officer's Assistant – batman], Marine Woodgate, met me on the beach with the words, 'I thought you'd like a cup of tea, Sir.' I can tell you that no cup of tea ever tasted better."

Out of the unit's 420 men, 76 were killed or wounded on the way – almost 20 per cent of the force.

Strange tanks led the way

The commandos who lost their lives during the landing should have been protected – according to British plans to save human lives – the moment the



Juno, which the Canadian troops are to secure, is also captured after about two hours. But with heavy losses: 350 dead, 600 wounded.

Gold Beach is secured at around 11 00. Nearly 1,000 British soldiers are injured or killed as a result of the fighting.

soldiers reached the beaches. As with Utah and Omaha, amphibious tanks were to lead the attack. In fact, the tanks' hulls of rubber-coated canvas were a British invention, and they were part of a whole arsenal of bizarre armoured vehicles developed for landing operations. Collectively, they were called Hobart's Funnies, after the head of the experimental unit from which the vehicles originated.

The plan was for the amphibious tanks to launch from their transport ship five kilometres out, after which two ship's propellers on the back would bring them to shore. However, the waves in the English Channel proved stronger than expected, and instead of stubbornly following the plan like the Americans at Omaha, the skippers of the British transport ships

sailed closer to the coast. There the sea was calmer, and more than half the tanks made it ashore without having their vulnerable canvas hulls crushed by waves. Sergeant Gariépy commanded the first of the amphibious tanks to reach the Canadian Juno Beach:

"I was the first tank coming ashore and the Germans started opening up with machine guns. But when we came to a halt on the beach, it was only then that they realised we were a tank when we pulled down our canvas skirt, the flotation gear... It was quite amazing. I still remember very vividly some of the machine gunners standing up in their posts looking at us with their mouths wide open."

Five minutes after the amphibious tanks, other strange British inventions followed, much to the ▶

British elite forces effectively secure the main access routes and thus the landing strip for the invasion force.



amazement of the German defenders. Captain Cyril Hendry of Juno Beach, for example, had a small metal bridge at the front of his British Churchill tank that could span nine-metre-wide gaps.

"I had to drop my bridge on the sand dunes so that the other tanks could climb and drop down on the far side."

Without the bridge, vehicles risked getting stuck in the loose sand on the beach. After the bridge was laid, a Sherman Crab followed. This tank's job was to trigger landmines with flailing steel chains mounted on a rotating drum. Slowly, a safe track was cleared across the beach until an armoured trench in the dunes beyond blocked the way.

But the British inventors had anticipated this, too. The mine-clearing tank moved over to the side, and from behind came another tank with a huge bundle of branches tied in front of its turret. The bundle was thrown into the trench and the tanks began to roll over.

The teamwork of the unconventional tanks created a safe path from the water's edge and inland behind the beach that both vehicles and soldiers could easily follow. They were followed by combat troops and, most notably, Churchill tanks with a powerful mortar instead of the usual gun. The weapon could hurl an 18-kg shell almost 100 metres through the air in a high trajectory and was specifically designed to disable bunkers. Other Churchills had trench-clearing flamethrowers mounted on the front armour. All of the

inventions were used in combat by the Canadians on Juno Beach and on the two British invasion beaches of Sword and Gold. The tanks ensured that the assault troops were not caught on the beaches by German machine gun fire, and the mine-clearing Sherman Crabs proved indispensable.

Along with the British Funnies, engineer troops arrived on foot. The men defused landmines near German roadblocks and blew up obstacles on the beaches, reducing the risk to subsequent landing craft when they arrived with fresh waves of soldiers. Yet, despite the effective efforts of the tanks, the British soldiers came under heavy fire as soon as their vessels reached the beaches.

Swimming around and clearing mines

Canadian Josh Honan was one of the engineering troops on Juno Beach. A brash officer had cajoled and pressurised him into taking on the dangerous job without first explaining what the assignment entailed. On the way, his landing craft got stuck on an obstacle and Honan, along with several others, had to drop all his equipment and jump in the water. With great difficulty, they managed to wrestle the vessel free, and then he set about removing detonators from the German landmines:

"My mates were attacking the pillboxes; that was their business and I was doing my business. I

British names were fishy

The British invasion beaches were originally named after sea creatures, but then the Canadians stepped in. They didn't want their beach to be named after a jellyfish and got high command to change the plan.

In the Allied division of labour, the British were responsible for the eastern invasion beaches. In the planning stages, General Montgomery decided to give the beaches code names inspired by fish species, so from the west they would be called Goldfish, Jellyfish, Swordfish and the smaller Bandfish furthest east, which would only come into play if the fleet failed to defeat a few troublesome coastal batteries. For short, they would simply be called Gold, Jelly, Sword and Band. The Canadians, however, were not happy. They had to attack the beach that bore the name Jelly, which would dent their national pride. Prime Minister Winston

Churchill agreed and immediately vetoed the idea. Thousands of soldiers were at risk of being killed and he was adamant that no mother should receive the news that her son had been killed in operations with inappropriate names. He believed that if a government was to have the trust of the people, it had to show maturity in all matters. A Canadian officer suggested the code word Juno, his wife's first name, and Allied code experts accepted it as innocuous and therefore as safe as Jelly.

English soldiers raise a toast with French champagne after completing the mission.



was a sitting duck, I didn't have anything to work with except my bare hands."

The tide was coming in and the waves were licking up the barriers Honan was working on.

"I could do my job only by wrapping my legs around the obstacles to keep from being floated away, and I could only use one hand."

Finally, Honan gave up trying to do any more and swam towards the beach instead. On the way, he passed a headless corpse with a very unusual knife in its pocket. Honan recognised it and knew the dead man was a comrade from his unit. The man had apparently been wounded and had been lying helplessly in the water when the propeller of a passing landing craft had decapitated him. The sight of his comrade was harrowing and, sheltering behind the seawall at the end of the beach, some soldiers offered the drenched and frozen Honan a sip of whisky to warm himself. He declined. He feared the alcohol would make him overconfident, and that was the last thing the military engineer wanted when he had to go out to clear mines again at low tide.

For the British on Sword Beach in the east, the battle was fierce but short. From his tank on the beach, Corporal Charles Baldwin watched his countrymen arrive and the chaos that ensued as the ramps of the landing crafts flapped down:

"They were flung about as German machine-gun fire hit them, clutching various parts of their bodies, jolting like rag dolls, then sinking out



On D-Day, the British reached several kilometres inland and were received as liberators by the French civilians.

of sight into the water. I often wondered if any of those unfortunate men survived the landing. Even slightly wounded, the weight of their equipment dragged them under."

Some units suffered heavy casualties, but after two hours, the troops had control of seven of the eight roads leading away from the beach.

Canadians faced tough resistance

Ten kilometres further west on Juno Beach, the Canadians and their British support units took a much harder beating. The losses in the first wave of the attack were as catastrophic as those suffered by the US troops at Omaha. The Canadian soldiers arrived in confusion and as they attempted to cross the beach, German machine guns ripped gaping holes in their ranks. Tank Sergeant Ronald Johnston had no idea of the traumatic experience that awaited him on the beach when his tank was carried towards Juno by a Rhino ferry – a low barge over which the waves washed.

When the ferry reached the beach, Johnston drove his tank ashore and discovered many lifeless bodies floating at the water's edge – dead or badly wounded men. Despite the gruesome sight, the sergeant grimly kept going.

"We just had to put it out of our minds. Just forget it. There was only one way forward."

Once on land, the tank came to a halt and the crew removed the waterproof materials that had protected the engine from seawater. German machine-gun fire whipped through the air. Many infantrymen were stuck, taking cover behind the tanks to avoid the German barrages. An officer from the British commandos appeared and ordered Johnston to drive to the left, over British soldiers, but the sergeant refused.

"I'm not going to run over any more of my own buddies today," he replied. Instead, the sergeant continued straight ahead and drove up between the ►



I'm not going to run over any more of my own buddies to day

■ Tank sergeant Ronald Johnston on refusing to carry out his orders on Juno Beach.



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dunes behind the beach. A seawall blocked his route, but the tank shot a hole in it with its gun, and once a bulldozer had cleared the debris away, Johnston was able to continue. Shortly afterwards, one of the tank's caterpillar tracks slid into a trench. Surprised Germans looked up at the large steel hull before machine-gun fire from the turret sent them fleeing. Another tank appeared and pulled Johnston free as Canadian infantry began to pass. Juno Beach had fallen.

Despite high casualties, the Canadians avoided getting stuck on the beach, as happened to the Americans at Omaha. The Germans in front of them numbered just 400 men, and there were no steep coastal cliffs blocking the way for men and vehicles. Once the German line of bunkers was breached, the land behind was open, but the brief fighting on the beach cost nearly 1,000 Canadian men their lives.

Confusion delayed advance

The plan was for the British soldiers to create a broad beachhead on D-Day and take important towns such as the historic Bayeux and especially Caen. However, confusion reigned on the British beaches and delayed the advance, even though the enemy had been defeated early on.

This was the experience of Etienne Webb, a member of the crew of a British landing craft that had its bottom ripped open by a German obstacle off Sword Beach. As the vessel sank, he swam to the beach. Expecting to find himself in the middle of a deadly battle, Webb instead stepped out into the chaos of bagpipes, shouts and commands:

"There was all this activity, bugles sounding, bagpipes playing, men dashing around, the commandos coming in off a landing craft and just moving off the beach as if it was a Sunday afternoon, chatting and mumbling away at whatever they were going to go through to do their little bit of stuff"

Leading the commandos was the famous Lord Lovat, who stood out with his old American Winchester rifle under his arm and a walking stick. He was a living legend, known equally for his daring missions and his quirky habits. A Scottish nobleman, he had his bagpipe player Bill Millin with him, who was told to play on the shore while other landing craft arrived.

Some troops felt a sense of history at the sound of the pipes that had accompanied the British on battlefields around the globe for centuries. Others found it pointless that a bagpiper should risk his life while German mortar shells exploded on the beach.

In the middle of it all were the beach commanders, who had the impossible task of bringing order to the unimaginable chaos that reigned on the invasion beaches. Broken landing craft lay on the shore. Tanks and vehicles of all kinds were stuck in the sand or their crews were waiting to be told what to do ►

The battles for French cities could rage for weeks. Often, the Allies allowed heavy aerial bombardments to weaken the German defenders before combat troops moved in.

next. Soldiers sat and brewed tea, relieved to be alive. During the war, the Americans often marvelled at how the British always took to drinking tea after completing one task instead of rushing on to the next.

Leading up to D-Day, everyone's anxiety had been about the landing itself, and once it was over, a relaxed holiday mood spread, even though more fighting awaited.

Officer with cudgel was threatening

On Juno Beach, the fun was spoilt by a bad tempered officer named Colin Maud. As the supreme commander on the beach, he reprimanded all the men who didn't keep moving:

"I'm chairman of the reception committee and of this party, so get a move on."

The polite words were in contrast to the man's angry face, the cudgel he carried menacingly in one hand and, not least, his angry German shepherd Winnie, whose leash he held in the other. Maud rushed around to relieve bottlenecks, but new soldiers and equipment kept getting in the way. One of the obstructions was a war correspondent who had

allegedly been promised he would be allowed to report live from the beach.

"My dear chap, there's a bit of a war going on here," responded Maud as he demanded that the war reporter disappear from the beach.

The journalist had to accept the argument. A few metres away lay the mangled bodies of 15 Canadians who had wandered into a minefield.

The bottlenecks on the British beaches didn't sit well with the British commander, Bernard Montgomery, who had set ambitious targets for how far his troops should reach into Normandy before sunset. From Gold Beach in the west, the British were to capture the town of Bayeux seven kilometres inland and link up with the Americans on Omaha Beach.

The British on Sword Beach in the east were destined to go the furthest. Before nightfall, the troops were to take Caen, 15 kilometres from the sea. The 3rd Canadian Division on Juno Beach would fill the gap between them.

Caen was of great strategic importance. The city was on the main road between Paris and the Cotentin Peninsula, where the Americans were advancing from Utah Beach. If the route was cut, German reinforcements to all the other invasion beaches would be forced to take a major detour. At the same time, the RAF wanted a German airbase west of Caen so that Allied fighter bombers could operate from



France instead of having to spend time and fuel flying from the south of England. The capture of Caen would give the Allies the initiative in the coming battles, as Montgomery had stated in a briefing back in May 1944.

"This will upset the [enemy's] plans and tend to hold him off while we build up strength. We must gain space rapidly, and peg out claims well inland."

However, no one had made more than sketchy plans for how the three divisions would achieve their objectives. Almost all attention had been focused on getting the units ashore with all their vehicles. From there, it was up to the commanders on the beaches to get their troops together, capitalise on the German confusion and advance at speed towards the inland objectives. A Soviet delegation at Allied headquarters had been puzzled when they saw the battle plan. In their judgement, a quick capture of Caen required two divisions, and Montgomery had only allocated one to the task. On the other hand, it had plenty of vehicles. Too many, as it turned out.

German minefields prevented the many jeeps, mortars and tanks from leaving the invasion beaches other than via the narrow routes that had been cleared from the water. There, the vehicles carrying soldiers had to fight for space with supply trucks, staff cars and even Hobart's Funnies, which had completed their most important task and were now in the way.

It wasn't until lunchtime that British soldiers began to advance from Sword Beach towards Caen. On foot. The tanks had to follow once they managed to untangle themselves from the bottlenecks on the beach. None of the soldiers now marching into battle had any idea that an entire German armoured division was stationed in the area around Caen. Intelligence had discovered the force a few days earlier, but Montgomery had not changed the plans and no warning had been passed on to the invasion troops.

Germans struck back

From the perspective of German headquarters, the British posed the biggest threat on D-Day. If Montgomery's men took Caen, they would have captured a major transport hub in Normandy and secured a gateway to the open plains to the south, ideal terrain for the Allies' many tanks.

From their positions around the town, the German 21st Panzer Division prepared to counter-attack. Reinforcements that had been heading towards Omaha were diverted early on to slow the British march from Gold Beach towards Bayeux. But the Germans also experienced traffic problems. Inside Caen, German tanks tried to get into position for the advance that would push the British back to the sea, but the vehicles couldn't get through the city's streets and boulevards. Some of the roads were blocked by rubble after Allied bombers had done their work. In the rest, Frenchmen, already fleeing southwards, ►

NEWS FROM THE FRONT



THE DAILY MAIL

6th June 1944

Our armies in N France. 4,000 invasion ships have crossed channel.

**British and Canadians
secure two beachheads.
Germans say tanks landed
near Caen, Normandy.**

Deliverance day has dawned. The great Allied invasion for the liberation of Europe began early this morning, when Allied armies, under the supreme command of General Eisenhower, started to land on the northern coast of France. Already British and Canadian troops have secured beachheads at least at two points and dug in, while a German report says that tanks have been landed in the area of Aromanches (20 miles NW of Caen on the Normandy coast).

The first official communique was issued from Supreme HQ Allied Expeditionary Force at 09.33. "Under the command of General Eisenhower Allied naval forces, supported strong air forces, began landing Allied armies this morning on the northern coast of France."

General Montgomery is in charge of the army group carrying out the assault. This army group includes British, Canadian and US forces. "An immense armada of upwards of 4,000 ships, with several thousand smaller craft, have crossed the Channel," said Mr

Churchill, giving the House of Commons news of the invasion.

The premier said that massed airborne landings have been successfully effected behind the enemy's lines. The landings on the beaches are proceeding at various points at the present time. The fire of the shore batteries has been largely quelled.

The Anglo-American Allies are sustained by about 11,000 first-line aircraft, which can be drawn upon as may be needed for the purposes of the battle.

So far the commanders who are engaged report that everything is proceeding according to plan, he said. And what a plan. This vast operation is undoubtedly the most complicated and difficult which has ever occurred. For three hours before General Eisenhower released the momentous news, German radio stations had been reporting "the invasion" with long accounts of battleships and destroyers off the mouth of the Seine, airborne landings in Normandy, and air attacks on the vital coast between Cherbourg and Le Havre.

The landings, it is understood in London, were made in Normandy between 06.00 and 08.15, minesweepers clearing a way.

As early as 6th June,
the British press wrote
in detail about the
missions on D-Day.



were trying to escape the fighting. The division commander gave up and sent his troops on a time consuming march around Caen.

It was past 18.00 before units from the 21st Panzer Division could begin their advance and counter-attack. The tank commander, Colonel Hermann von Oppeln-Bronikowski, received the final instructions from his superior:

"Oppeln, the future of Germany may very well rest on your shoulders. If you don't push the British back into the sea, we've lost the war."

"General, I intend to do my best," replied the tank commander. On the way forward, Oppeln-Bronikowski

met the commander of the 716th Division, which had been manning the coastal positions. The man tearfully told him that his unit no longer existed. He knew nothing about the situation and could not pinpoint the British positions on a map. During the evening, German reconnaissance units reached the sea between the Canadian Juno Beach and the British Sword. There they waited for the tanks to join them, but Oppeln Bronikowski's armoured unit never arrived.

He had been forced to turn back when the enemy discovered his unit and it became a target for the Allies' ferocious firepower from artillery and battleship guns. As the Germans were driven back, darkness descended



over Normandy. The Allies had reached land and despite bloody fighting, they had suffered fewer casualties than feared. However, in some areas they were a long way from the targets Bernard Montgomery had identified and the important city of Caen had not been captured.

To his chief of staff, Alan Brooke, Montgomery explained his theory about a crucial difference between the British soldiers and their German opponents:

"The trouble with our British lads is that they are not killers by nature".

Despite his words and the supposed leniency of the British, the three beaches had been secured. Meanwhile, the eastern bank of the River Orne was in British hands,

equipment and soldiers poured on to the beaches later in the day, and the Allies had total air supremacy.

D-Day had been a success and for the British had come at far less cost than they had dared to imagine. Conversely, the Germans had failed to strike back decisively when the British were still hampered by the chaos on the beach.

Counter-attacking with large armoured reserves was a fundamental part of German General Erwin Rommel's defence plan, but when the invasion came, the army leadership acted too slowly. Still, armoured vehicles could be heard rolling through the darkness of Normandy. The Germans were ready to strike back. ■



Winston Churchill and Bernard Montgomery (front left) disembark at Courseulles on 12th June 1944. The small harbour town was liberated by the Canadians on D-Day.

How the beaches were cleared

BOMBARDMENT paved the way

Pilots, naval captains and expertly trained mine-clearers formed the vanguard on D-Day. As minesweepers made their way to the coast, shells and bombs pounded the beaches.

D-Day actually began 14 days before 6th June 1944. That was when the Allied air force started bombing all the German radar stations in Normandy. In order not to reveal the invasion target, the Allies bombed the entire Atlantic coastline of France, while shells also rained down on the Netherlands and Belgium. The mission succeeded. As the Allies sailed across the English Channel, the German radar network was so damaged that it failed to spot the invasion fleet on its way.

At the front were 287 minesweepers, which created a safe route through the thousands of mines laid by the Kriegsmarine in the Channel. First, the minesweepers cleared ten safe corridors to the assembly areas where the invasion fleet would wait before the attack. Once the work on the corridors was completed, at 03.30 the minesweepers began clearing the passageways that the landing craft would sail through to the beaches. At the same time the invasion fleet assembled, and soldiers and tanks moved down into the landing craft from their previous positions on board the larger ships, before heading for the beaches.

While paratrooper drops had been happening all night, pilots only started carpet bombing the Normandy coastline 35 minutes before the landings. Most of the bombs were ordinary 50-kilogram shells, which could destroy machine-gun positions but had no effect on the heavier bunker complexes, so 250-kg high-explosive bombs were also used – unfortunately, most missed their targets.

As dawn broke, about 40 minutes before the first soldiers reached the beaches, the navy's 500 ships began bombarding the coast. At Omaha, they hammered shells down on the German positions for 37 minutes before they stopped, three minutes before the landing craft reached the beach. The invasion was underway; now it was time for the soldiers to take over and put their training to the test.

Aerial bombardment killed Germans

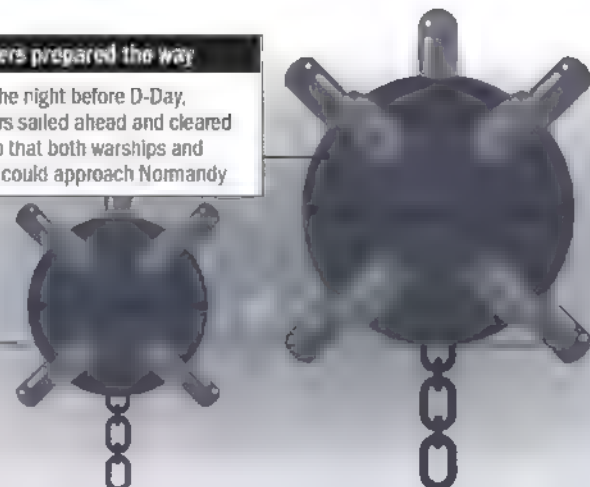
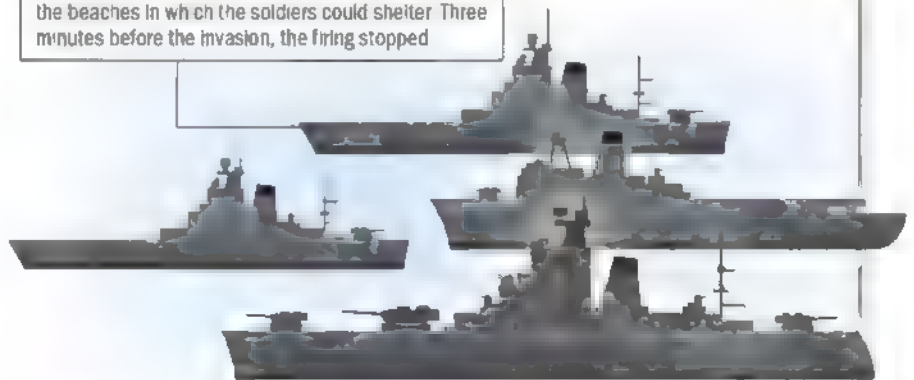
From 06.00, as day dawned, the Allied air force started bombing the beaches and defensive positions. The bombardment stopped just five minutes before the first soldiers reached Omaha Beach at 06.35.

Fleet started an inferno

For 40 minutes, heavily armed naval ships bombed German bunkers. The shells also created craters on the beaches in which the soldiers could shelter. Three minutes before the invasion, the firing stopped.

Minesweepers prepared the way

Throughout the night before D-Day, minesweepers sailed ahead and cleared the waters so that both warships and landing craft could approach Normandy.



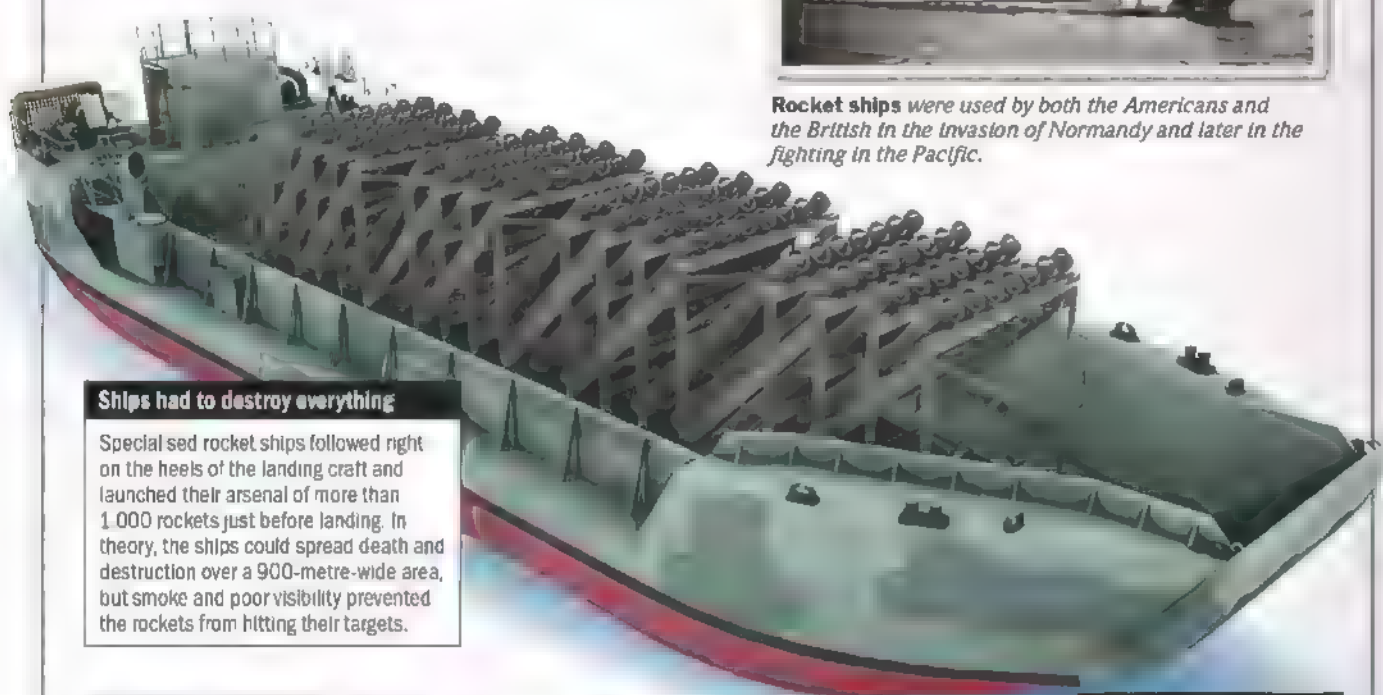
ROCKET SHIPS

unleashed hell

On the approach to the beach – in the minutes before the first soldiers disembarked – customised rocket ships and tanks bombarded the beaches in an infernal onslaught.



Rocket ships were used by both the Americans and the British in the invasion of Normandy and later in the fighting in the Pacific.



Ships had to destroy everything

Specialised rocket ships followed right on the heels of the landing craft and launched their arsenal of more than 1,000 rockets just before landing. In theory, the ships could spread death and destruction over a 900-metre-wide area, but smoke and poor visibility prevented the rockets from hitting their targets.

Mortar teams got going

Special mortar teams in the landing craft helped bombard the enemy in the last moments before the boats reached the landing zone.



Tanks followed suit

From the boats carrying the tanks towards the beach, the drivers began their bombardment even before they reached the shore.

Defences were strongest at Omaha

Omaha Beach was the widest and steepest of the five landing beaches. It was also by far the best fortified, even taking into account the size difference. For example, the beach had five times as many of the strong bunker positions called *Widerstandsneest* as the British Sword Beach, and the number of machine-gun and mortar positions exceeded 100.

Beach	Width	Bunkers	Antitank	Machine-gun positions
Sword	3.2 km	2	15	21
Juno	6.0 km	4	13	38
Gold	5.5 km	4	14	19
Omaha	7.2 km	10	35	113
Utah	2.0 km	3	13	10

SPECIAL FORCES

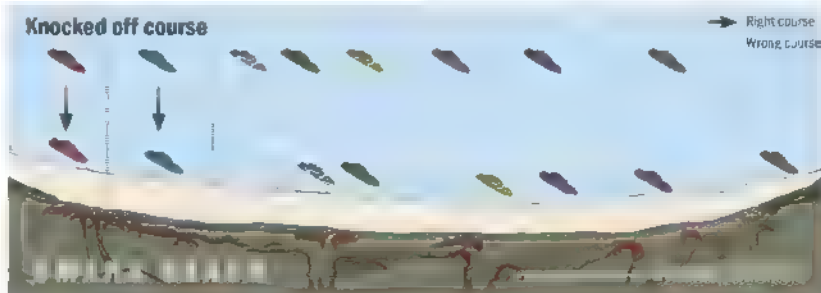
consisted of 32 men

In the landing craft, 32 men stood ready to storm the beach the moment the vessel's ramp was lowered. Everyone from regular riflemen to a medic and specially trained demolition teams were on board each boat.



All went wrong at Omaha

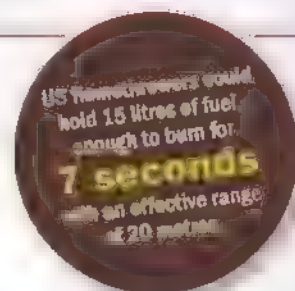
The 1,500 soldiers who landed in the first wave on Omaha should have arrived in their own designated sectors. From there, the specialist teams could clear the beaches and make way for the next soldiers in the second wave. In reality, most landing craft were blown off course and the Americans landed in large clumps, making them easy targets for the Germans.



BEACHES

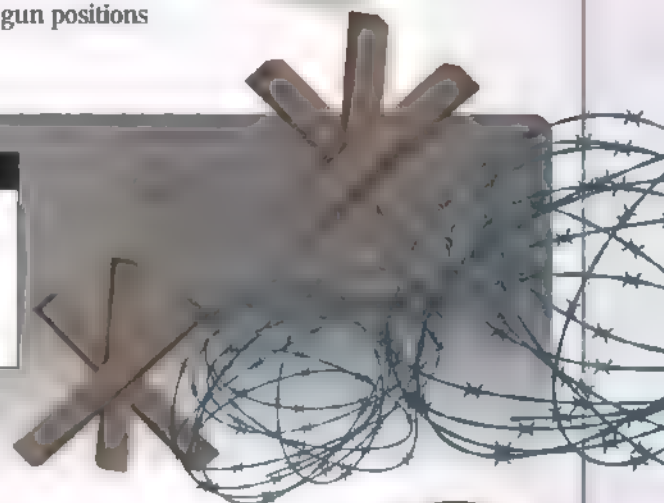
were cleared in stages

To clear the German positions, the Americans first had to get through the beach barricades and barbed wire, then they had to defeat light machine-gun positions and finally clear the heavily fortified bunkers.



Blasting team cleared the way

The demolition team was the first to go into action. Protected by riflemen and light machine guns, they blasted holes in barricades and barbed wire, making landing easier for the soldiers who would follow. The rest of the assault force moved quickly along the beach.



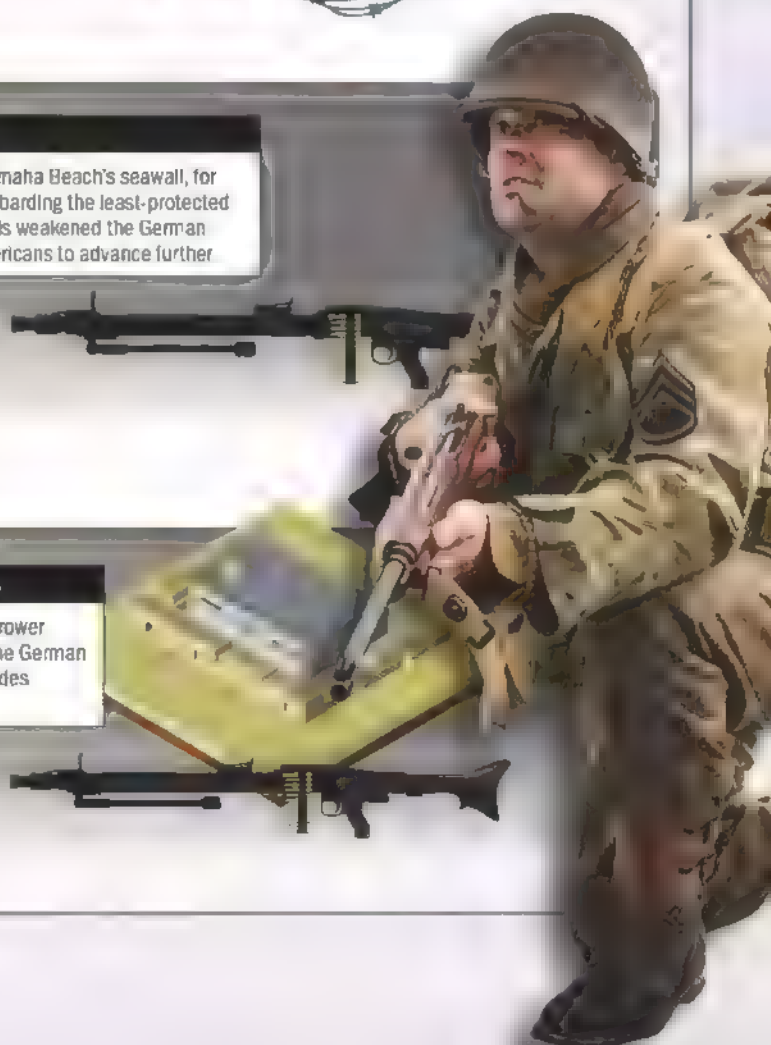
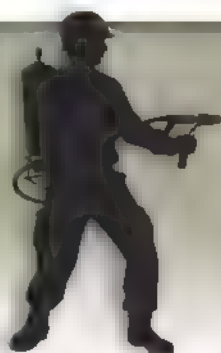
Mortar team took up the fight

Hiding in bomb craters or behind Omaha Beach's seawall, for example, mortar teams began bombarding the least-protected German machine-gun positions. This weakened the German defensive fire and enabled the Americans to advance further.



Flamethrowers cleared bunkers

Through lookout holes, the flamethrower teams spread death and terror in the German bunkers. Riflemen with hand grenades helped clear the bunkers.





THE GERMANS FOUGHT BACK

Now we have them where
we can destroy them.

Normandy, June 1944



Field Marshal Erwin Rommel reinforced Normandy's defences on the beaches, inland and even beneath the waves prior to D-Day.

The Germans fought back

On D-Day, three German panzer divisions with nearly 500 tanks prepared to crush any Allied soldier who set foot on the beaches of Normandy. Shortly after the invasion, hardened elite troops and young Nazis from the Panzer Lehr and SS “Hitlerjugend” divisions launched their counter-attack – the enemy would be hit hard.

Most of the 20,540 men in the 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitlerjugend” (Hitler Youth) had one thing in common: they’d all been born in 1926 and grew up in Hitler’s paramilitary youth organisation. In June 1944, the brainwashed boys and their Waffen-SS officers stood ready in Normandy, eager to feel the heat of battle for the first time in their lives.

At 17-18 years old, the boys were too young to join the armed forces on paper, but the year before, the German military leadership had realised that an Allied invasion of France was imminent. To keep troops on the hard-pressed Eastern Front, the army leadership proposed the creation of the 12th SS – an elite regiment of indoctrinated German boys raised in

Hitler’s Third Reich. According to the army leadership, the class of ’26 were healthy, strong, fanatical and, despite their inexperience, would fight to the death on the battlefield. Hitler authorised the division’s creation and deployment to Normandy.

The boys of the division had been hand-fed ideological training and Nazi propaganda through their upbringing in the Hitler Youth. Every single one had volunteered, and at the head of the Nazi Youth was Kurt Meyer, an SS officer and veteran of the invasion of Poland five years earlier. “Panzer Meyer”, as he was known, oversaw the young men’s education and had trained them to possess true fighting spirit.

On 6th June 1944, when news of the Allied landing in Normandy arrived at the division’s headquarters

The Allies dubbed the 12th SS “Hitlerjugend” “the baby division”, yet the young Germans were fanatical and had been hardened by their tough training.



south east of Caen, there was an almost drunken excitement. All morning, the soldiers had waited for the order to counter-attack with the approximately 150 tanks at the disposal of the SS Division Hitlerjugend. One of those waiting was Corporal Helmuth Pock, who described the situation in his diary:

"In and around our quarters, lively activity has begun. The soldiers are, once again, busy with the never-ending preparations of supplies and equipment, while officers and dispatch riders arrive constantly. Every time one or more of our officers arrive, there is a loud hurrah among them. Some embrace and slap each other's shoulders. Others rip their caps from their heads and throw them high into the air. There is a mood of exuberance which also begins to grip us. It cannot be explained, it is just there and being felt.

"Then, engine noise in the air, and here they come already. The officers holler 'Cover!' and everyone tries to find some as quickly as possible, and to become as close to being invisible as one can. As I look up I recognize the Balken cross on the fuselage and the wings of the aircraft. Those are ours, our Me 109s, 30 to 40 of them, which roar above us at low altitude.

We have jumped from cover and wave anything we can move at our pilots. 'Hurrah', 'Heil', 'Bravo' and whatever other shouts of enthusiasm one can think of are being yelled at the fighter aircraft. We wonder if they can see us. Yes! They fly a loop, rock their wings



The Panzer Lehr division was created in 1943 and consisted of 15,000 experienced elite troops from the Armoured Troops Schools (Panzertruppenschulen).



From 1941-43, the 21st Panzer Division fought in Africa under Rommel. On D-Day, they were effectively the only panzer division in the invasion zone.



The young troops of the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" grew up in Hitler's youth corps, but few had seen combat.

In greeting, and roar across our heads. They are flying so low that we can distinctly make out the pilots in their cockpits. That is something which makes our soldiers' hearts glad, a picture of might and strength, of force ready for action, and of determination. There is enthusiasm everywhere. 'We'll show the Tommies' and similar lines dominate our conversation."

Before long, Pock and his fellow soldiers would receive a baptism of fire. Even before the day was over, their delusions about the superiority of Nazism and the Aryan race would begin to crumble.

Nazi response came late

The division's first disappointment came when the order to counter-attack didn't materialise immediately. The reason was equal parts comical and tragic. The day before D-Day, Monday 5th June, Hitler and Eva Braun had held court at the Führer's holiday home in the Bavarian Alps. There they'd entertained the likes of Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels. The party watched news reels and talked until the early hours. It wasn't until 02.00 that the Führer retired.

Adolf Hitler was asleep when disturbing reports came in from Normandy. The Allies had landed in several places, according to reports from high-ranking officers. But no one dared wake Hitler. German intelligence had been warning of an impending diversionary manoeuvre for some time, but no one had the nerve to disturb the dictator with idle rumours. It wasn't until 11.00, when Hitler got up, that the generals were confident enough to break the news of the Allied landings.

To most people's surprise, Hitler reacted not with shock and anger, but with relief.

"The news couldn't be better," he told the head of the Wehrmacht High Command, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel. "As long as they were in Britain we couldn't get at them. Now we have them where we can destroy them."

The Führer's optimism was contagious, and Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring also trumpeted his belief in victory that morning ►



as the British and Americans overran the defences of the Atlantic Wall. The two men's optimism was borderline naive, but it was based on the idea that German soldiers with deep battle experience from the Eastern Front coupled with Hitler's most loyal young men would be tasked with slowing down the Allies. In total, three armoured divisions were stationed near the invasion beaches. Named Panzer Lehr, 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" and the 21st Panzer Division respectively, their fanaticism and fighting spirit would now be put to the test against the enormous Allied war machine as it rolled ashore across five beaches in Normandy.

Entire convoys were bombed to pieces

At 14.30, more than 12 hours after the first reports of enemy activity in Normandy, the long-awaited order came directly from Hitler. The Allies must be pushed back into the English Channel by any means necessary.

To fulfil the task, the 12th SS had 148 tanks and 333 other vehicles at its disposal, rumbling northwards with Kurt Meyer at its head. The advance began in cloudy weather and without any notable incidents on the road

from the panzer division's base south-east of Caen towards the invasion beaches. But as the Germans approached the areas where the British and Americans had landed, the boys saw the first signs that the war was no longer a game. Helmuth Pock noticed how the roadside was littered with wrecked German vehicles.

"They are sitting where they were hit, burnt out ... Grenades are scattered about, shells, all types of ammunition, among them dead soldiers. Without doubt, a supply column was hit here. Next to one of the large bomb craters sits a knocked out armoured personnel carrier. The hatch at the rear of the vehicle is open, the legs and lower body of a soldier are sticking out. It looks as if the man is kneeling. As we drive by slowly I see that the upper body is completely burnt. Maybe, a merciful bullet killed him before this."

The slight puzzled Pock. He and his comrades had always been taught that Germany's enemies were inept and poorly equipped.

"The march during the day becomes more and more dangerous. The pastures and fields are ploughed by bomb craters. We realise more and

The scrub in Normandy was so dense that Allied tanks were fitted with metal teeth at the front that could break through the dense hedges in the terrain.



07:30

Rundstedt deploys panzer divisions to the invasion zone, an order only Hitler can give. At 07.30, the divisions halt.

11:00

At midday, Hitler is briefed after waking. He believes the attack is a diversion and refuses to release the panzer divisions.

16:00

It's not until 16.00 that the elite forces Lehr and 12th SS are ordered to advance. By then, the Allies have established a bridgehead.

more that the enemy, as far as materiel is concerned, does not seem to be inferior to us," he wrote.

The superiority of the enemy was clearly demonstrated as Spitfire fighters began to swarm over the division, Pock noticed. "A string of Spitfires is attacking the last platoon of 15th Company. Rockets and other weapons are reaping a grizzly harvest. The platoon is driving down a sunken road, evasion is not possible. A grenadier is lying in the road, a jet of blood shooting from his throat, an artery has been shot through. He dies in our arms. The ammunition in an amphibious vehicle explodes with a loud bang, the blast shoots flames high into the sky, the vehicle is torn to pieces."

Germans were 6 km from the beach

After an eight-hour drive, the force reached a small town south-west of Caen, where they set up camp for the night. Without having been in combat, the 12th SS had lost 83 men during the enemy's aerial bombardment: 22 were dead, three non-commissioned officers and 19 privates; 60 were wounded and one was missing. The harsh truth of war had hit home for the boys of the Hitler Youth, and during the course of the day, reality had also dawned on the commander-in-chief of the German forces in the west, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. The message from Rundstedt's headquarters in Paris was unmistakable.

"Defeat the Allied forces before the day is out. By the time they receive reinforcements, it will be too late," the Field Marshal ordered.

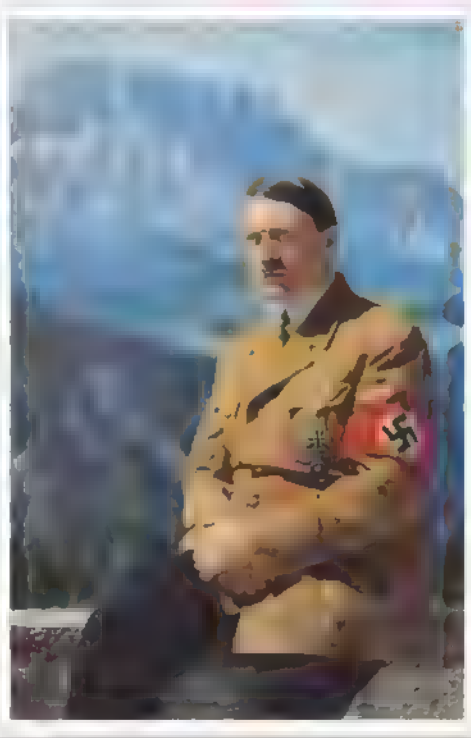
Likely, he would be proved correct. If the Germans did not manage to push the Allies back into the water quickly, the enormous flow of supplies, new troops and tanks would quickly crush the German defenders. In other words, it was now or never if the Western Front was to be held. As a result, another division in Normandy the 21st Panzer Division was also sent into battle with clear orders to throw the enemy back to the English Channel. The division was based in

Caen, just 14 kilometres from the beaches, and late in the afternoon of 6th June, they advanced towards the British, but did not get far.

"All hell broke loose," wrote Hans von Luck, who had counter-attacked the Allies at the village of Ranville, nine kilometres inland.

"The heaviest naval guns, artillery and fighter bombers plastered us without pause. Radio contacts were lost, wounded came back."

Kampfgruppe (Battle Group) Rauch did manage to drive a wedge between the



The day before D-Day. Hitler was at his villa in the Bavarian Alps, hosting a party that included Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels among others.

British and Canadian forces that had landed on the beaches. The German soldiers were just six kilometres from the coast and could see the beaches where the Allies were now unloading equipment before the unit was pushed back. In the air, transport planes and fighters swarmed en route with reinforcements to the Allied beachhead, and British tanks had already begun to take the fight to them. No German forces managed to get closer to the sea during the invasion, and the cost of the advance was high. As the 21st Panzer Division retreated to Caen, it left behind 70 of the division's 124 armoured vehicles.

Death arrived from the air

By the end of the day, the Allies had established a beachhead 30 kilometres long and 10 kilometres deep. The successful Allied advance signalled defeat for the German forces and their aim of pushing the enemy back into the sea, but the overriding cause of the Germans' agony came from the air, where they were completely outnumbered.

Ever since 1942, Britain had produced more aeroplanes than the Third Reich, and the US entry into the war had seriously upset the balance. According to Armaments Minister Albert Speer, director of the Junkers aircraft factories Heinrich Koppenberg burst into tears when he saw the production figures of the US factories. The US Air Force also trained 30,000 pilots a year and the investment paid off. On D-Day, the Allies flew ►

AT THE SAME TIME

JAPAN

- The US bombs the Japanese mainland.

BRITAIN

- Churchill informs the House of Commons about the liberation of Rome and D-Day

USA

- On 6th June lights on the Statue of Liberty signal 'V' for Victory

Normandy's terrain was impenetrable

Thick impenetrable hedges and narrow roads transformed Normandy into one of the most difficult battlefields of WWII.

Although the Allies were well prepared for Normandy's challenging terrain, they had not been able to predict how the fighting in the northern French region would play out. Across most of Normandy troops had to fight their way through the bocage, an almost impassable jungle of tall, dense hedges that encompassed thousands upon thousands of fields and pastures. The bocage was so high and wide that even tanks had difficulty penetrating the thicket. By 1944, the Germans knew the area to perfection and had established defensive positions within the thick hedges, from where they provided a tight defence. The German forces hid in camouflaged positions from which they had prepared perfect firing lines with machine guns, snipers, mortar positions and anti-tank guns.

Unlike the German defenders, the Allies had to sneak along the narrow roads that meandered through the landscape, surrounded by stone walls

that blocked the view and turned every turn into a potential death trap. As a result, the Allies chose to let tanks and infantry advance across the fields between the hedgerows. However, for every 100 metres the forces traveled, they had to pass through a new earth embankment and hedgerow, which was potentially lethal. The battles in the Normandy bocage were so fierce that the Americans considered them to be the toughest they fought in the war, comparing them to the jungle fighting that took place on the Pacific Islands.

It wasn't until the Allies welded large metal teeth to the front of their tanks in mid-June that they were able to break through the dense bushes of the bocage at an acceptable pace. Despite their new tool, the Allied soldiers still faced a tough fight. Not until the end of August, when the British and Americans had liberated all of Lower Normandy, was the gruelling 'jungle' battle finally over.

14,674 sorties, while the Germans only managed to get planes in the air 100 times. Many of the pilots who made it to the skies suffered a sad fate, including a group of German fighter planes, which were destroyed during an attack on the Le Mans airfield.

For those pilots who actually saw combat, the experience was terrifying and frustrating. Sergeant Herbert Kaiser, a seasoned pilot, got a shock as he flew over Caen in his Messerschmitt Bf 109:

"If the missions we had undertaken as fighters in the defence of the Reich until then had been tough and tested our nerves, the missions to follow on the invasion front were going to give us an insight into hell. I will never forget our first intervention that morning, skimming over the landing beaches at Caen. The surface of the sea was saturated with hundreds of boats of all sizes, while the sky was filled with bomber formations going to attack our front, accompanied by countless fighters. Lost in the middle of all that, a handful of Messerschmitts: ours!"

German pilots realised first-hand that the Nazi propaganda had been a big lie. Pilot Alfred Wagner felt cheated: *"At the beginning 1944, we'd been told that the Luftwaffe had a superiority in numbers of ten to one. The prospects looked good, especially after I'd shot down seven of those ten. But it was all a lie. When I was shot down myself, we were being attacked by three or four Allied planes at one time. So much for Luftwaffe superiority!"*

Captain Hans Groos, who the day before had seen Luftwaffe planes crash at Le Mans, tried to find an airfield for his unit on 7th June. He was on the back of a truck when he spotted a convoy of around 25

Normandy's dense vegetation is known as the 'bocage'. Dating back to Roman times, it acts as both a windbreak and field boundary.



They stared at me as if I was a ghost, that is the way I must have looked. ■ Captain Hans Fenn on the burns he suffered in battle.



trucks. Immediately, he received a demonstration of what a lack of air support meant:

"On a long road, completely exposed, we passed a convoy of approximately 25 trucks, transporting 21 cm rockets, destined for the artillery. Before our eyes, this convoy was attacked by four Mustangs which, in roughly seven passes, tore them to shreds. A quarter of an hour later, there were only three or four vehicles intact; all the others were on fire at 100-metre intervals."

Opposing tanks clashed

For the Germans, it was all about repelling the troops from the various landing beaches. Another goal was to hold Caen. This was where important transport routes intersected, linking Normandy to the rest of France. But despite growing German resistance, total dominance of the airspace allowed the Allies to push further and further inland.

On the morning of 7th June, Canadian forces reached the small town of Authie, from where they could see the airfield at Caen. When Meyer spotted the enemy, he spied an opportunity to halt the advance.

"Enemy tanks were rolling towards Authie from Buron. My God! What an opportunity! The tanks

were moving right across the front of the H./SS Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 25! The enemy formation was showing us its unprotected flank. I issued orders to all battalions, the artillery and the tanks: 'Do not fire! Fire on my command only!' ... The enemy commander only seemed concerned with the airfield; it was right in front of him ... I gave the signal for the attack ... The lead enemy tank was ablaze, and I watched the crew bailing out. More tanks were torn to pieces with loud explosions ... The enemy had been struck deep in his flank at that point," Meyer later recounted in his memoirs.

Panzer Meyer's unit rolled towards Authie to take the city in triumph. But along the way, they encountered unexpectedly fierce resistance from Allied forces. Captain Hans Fenn described the battle:

"I. Zug suddenly found itself on a wide open plain and under fire from the Canadian anti tank guns. [We] took a direct hit between the side and the turret as we were making the big mistake of trying to turn while under fire from the anti-tank guns. The shell ripped off my Panzer commander's leg. As I heard later, he still managed to get out of the turret. Because it was a phosphor shell, the whole Panzer was immediately in flames. I lost consciousness ►

During battles in the bocage, soldiers used field verges as transport routes and trenches.

FACTS

As many as

9,000

German soldiers died during the Allied attack on D Day. At the same time, thousands of French civilians died as a result of bombing raids.

since the rubber cover of my gunner's hatch charred and jammed the hatch, preventing me from getting out immediately. Somehow, sub-consciously, I managed to crawl to the loader's hatch. I can only remember the moment clearly when I fell from the hatch to the ground, head first. With severe third degree burns I walked back in the direction of our grenadiers following behind. They stared at me as if I was a ghost, that is the way I must have looked. Our medic NCO drove me to the field hospital."

Despite Allied resistance, Meyer's panzer troops managed to take the town and secure a rare victory for the German troops. Encouraged, the tanks rolled towards the next village, Buron. Here, however, the Canadians were determined not to give ground. Volleys of anti-tank rockets flew towards the German armoured troops, who immediately retreated.

"I have never experienced such concentrated artillery fire before," wrote Meyer. "Inevitably I think of Verdun [one of the most destructive and bloody battles of World War I]."

Hedges became German trump card

From his headquarters in Paris, Gerd von Rundstedt reported after the rare victory that everything was going smoothly:

"The troops engaged have fought bravely. Where ground has been lost this has only occurred

because of the enemy's materiel superiority. This will now change. Strong forces with panzers, artillery of all types and mortars are being brought up, and the Luftwaffe will considerably increase its operations ... Using its last man and last gun, Army Group B will attack and destroy the enemy forces which have landed ... Not only will our attack continue, but will end in the final re capture of the main defensive line."

Nothing could be more wrong. The last tank division in the area, Panzer Lehr, was indeed deployed on 8th June alongside the 12th SS in the bitter battle between Caen and the beaches. But during the division's 150-kilometre advance, it had already suffered serious losses. Weakened, but still capable of fighting, the Germans had launched an attack north-east of Caen on 9th June. Here, the British troops were firmly entrenched on the east bank of the Orne River, but the Wehrmacht forces had to change this if they were to repel the invasion. As long as the River Orne remained in Allied hands, the Germans could not send their forces against the bridgeheads on the beaches. However, the attack failed when the British shot down three German tanks. In their attempts to escape, German commanders ran over some of the other vehicles and crushed several of their own men.

The conquest of the River Orne was over before it began, and the Germans could no longer go on the ▶

Two soldiers from the 12th SS "Hitlerjugend" battle British troops near Caen.

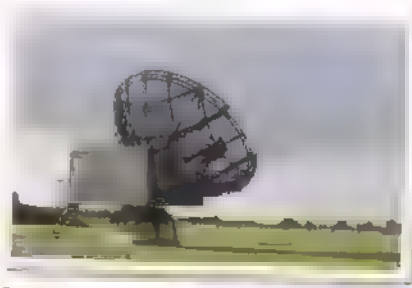


German defence pockets held out for days

Although the Allies had managed to land troops on all the designated beaches on D Day, several German bunkers and strategically important radar stations held out against the enemy for days, even after being surrounded on 6th June. The most tenacious were soldiers at the radar station in the small town of Dourvres-la Délivrande about 1.5 km from the British landing areas and with a good view of the beaches, the surrounding roads and the strategically important city of Caen, 12 km away. Four powerful radars enabled the Germans to keep a constant watch on

everything the British did in French airspace, allowing them to quickly send planes into the air to counter any attack. 230 Luftwaffe troops defended the area, which was heavily fortified with anti-tank guns, field artillery, mortars and machine guns. The entire area was also surrounded by a minefield and barbed wire.

The strong defensive position proved its worth when the British attacked the facility several times, but were forced to give up. It wasn't until 12 days after D-Day that British forces managed to break through and secure the last German bastion close to the beaches.



A reconstructed Würzburg radar can still be seen at Dourvres-la-Délivrande

1 Attack from the north: On the afternoon of 17th June, the British deploy mine-clearing tanks. These are fitted with chain flails to gradually blast a path through the minefield.

4 Head north: A road leads to the second, smaller area of the radar station. Here, too, the British advance swiftly, securing the area in 30 minutes.

3 Bunkers fall: 160 British soldiers storm the post's bunkers. Here, the Germans surrender, starving after 12 days and with very few supplies parachuted in.

2 Diversion from the south-west: While 44 armoured vehicles make their way from the north, other tanks approach from the south-west. Their purpose is to create a diversion from the actual attack.

→ Diversion
→ Attack route
Minefield

0 100 200 m

Field phones ensured better communication between infantry and tanks on D-Day.



The cable allowed attacks to be coordinated even if the tank crew couldn't see or hear the infantry.

offensive. Instead, a bitter defensive battle for every metre of terrain began, and the Germans' best trump card was Normandy's 'bocage' landscape, made up of small fields surrounded by stone walls and hedges. The bocage slowed down the Allied advance, and the hedges formed a kind of elevated trench for the Germans to utilise.

"Our tactics were simple when attacked by infantry. We would hold with the aid of the hedgerows. If we saw the Amis withdraw we then did so ourselves because in moments [abos and Artfeuer [army slang for artillery fire] would pound our foxholes. Then their infantry would take over our old line, thinking we were destroyed. Afterwards they would advance casually and we would hit them from the next hedgerow. We lost ground ... It was all we could do," explained Lieutenant Hans Heinze after the war.

The battle for the Bocage was extremely fierce, as both the Germans and the Allies knew that Caen was of vital importance. East of Caen, the landscape became flat and open, making it suitable for airfields. Therefore, Caen had to be held – or recaptured – at all costs.

Officers were reduced into tears

But the battle was lost. Within a few days of D-Day, the German forces lacked ammunition, manpower and air support. And the Allied bombs broke even the most hardened veterans from the Eastern Front, Hans Heinze reported:

"They hit us with all they had, literally driving us into the ground. After this bombardment I went to find Lieutenant Heller. The ground was torn apart and I found him with his men in a dug-out. He was crying. He wasn't ashamed of his tears because he was crying for his men who'd been killed. This much decorated soldier had been in the French ▶



Allied bombers dominated the airspace on D-Day. Here, US pilots bomb the railway network near the River Orne.

He said to me, 'If they would only fight us man to man we would have a chance.' ■ Lieutenant Hans Heinze on the Allied bombardment.



THIS IS HOW.

...Germany might have won on D-Day

On D-Day, the Allies threw an overwhelming number of men and huge amounts of equipment on to the beaches of Normandy. But the Germans could still have won if they had reacted immediately, according to historians.

As Allied forces began to fight their way out of the beaches and inland on the morning of 6th June 1944, Nazi Germany's fate was seemingly sealed. Within hours, the Allies' superiority in men and equipment put Hitler's forces on the defensive and the slow but inexorable march towards the liberation of Western Europe and Germany's surrender had begun. At least, that's the most common – and probably the most realistic – view. But some historians believe that even at this late stage, the Germans could have turned the tide and the course of the war.

The key to German success was the area around the strategically important city of Caen. In order to move from the small beachheads into France itself, the Allies had to take the

city. If the Wehrmacht had been able to concentrate large numbers of troops in and around the city before the Allies arrived, the argument goes, the Germans would have had a good chance of holding off the invading forces and trapping them in Normandy.

But the Germans reacted too late. In the hours and days after D-Day, it was almost impossible to move large numbers of troops towards Caen without being bombarded by enemy aircraft. The Allies were far superior in the air, as the Luftwaffe lacked aircraft, pilots and fuel, leaving British and US aircraft free to fire on the advancing German troops on their way to the battle zone. To stand a chance, the Germans should have launched their defence the moment the Allies landed on the

beaches. On the morning of 6th June, the weather was grey and overcast, and the cloud cover prevented Allied aircraft from firing on the German panzer divisions. If Hitler and the army leadership had immediately ordered large troop concentrations to fortify Caen and the area around the city, the Germans could have countered the attacks with tremendous force. While the Germans held off the Allies at Caen, they could gain valuable time to reorganise forces and, for example, send large numbers of tanks towards Normandy. A reinforced defence of Caen would have allowed the Germans to at least provide significant resistance to the Allies and delay their advance into France and the rest of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Allied bombers played a crucial role in the outcome of D-Day. Entire towns, such as Saint-Lo south-west of Caen, were bombed.



campaign of 1940 and in Russia. He said to me, 'If they would only fight us man to man we would have a chance, we can't fight their planes and bombs.' I knew he was right."

Before long, German chiefs were forced to come to the same conclusion. Dissatisfaction centred around the Luftwaffe's shortcomings, and in a letter to his wife, Erwin Rommel dejectedly complained about the Allies' total air supremacy.

"The enemy's air superiority has a very grave effect on our movements. There's simply no answer to it," he said ruefully. Another officer added, *"We can bring out whole armies and they'll smash them completely with their air forces within a week."*

The final counter-attack failed

The last desperate counteroffensive was launched on 10th June, when the remnants of the three panzer divisions were to strike together from Caen. But the forces lacked supplies and the attack was postponed. Before the officers could formulate a new plan, fighter bombers hit the headquarters of Panzer Group West, killing the entire senior command unit in charge of coordinating the crucial counter-attack. For the first time, the Führer got something resembling the truth about the Western Front from Rommel:

"The enemy has complete mastery of the air over the battlefield as far as around 100 km behind the front. By day he cuts off almost all traffic on roads or by-roads or over open ground ... Troops and staffs have to

hide by day in sheltered areas to avoid the continuous attacks from the air."

Before the report reached Hitler, the head of the forces in the west, Gerd von Rundstedt, added a note:

"Despite the huge disparity in equipment and material, the troops of all branches of the Wehrmacht are fighting outstandingly and doing all they can. Their spirit and morale are good, but in the long term the Anglo Americans' materiel superiority cannot fail to have an impact on the men," he wrote.

The message was clear: the Germans were losing. In the battle between the Allied war industry and the sacrifice of the German Fatherland, weapons and supplies would win out over numbers of soldiers. Although Hitler was shaken, he refused to be swayed:

"Everyone must defend himself to the last round," the Führer demanded. *"No orders to retreat may be given."*

For Kurt Meyer, the order represented suicide, and after more than a month of brave fighting around Caen, he withdrew the 12th SS "Hitlerjugend" on 10th July. By then, the division had been reduced from 20,000 to around 5,000 men, including Corporal Helmuth Pock.

Caen fell on 20th July. Normandy was lost and just eight months later, Allied soldiers crossed the Rhine and moved into the heart of Nazi Germany. ■

Erwin Rommel visited the Atlantic Wall in 1944 and was reportedly shocked by the many holes and weaknesses in the famous defence system.



Rommel was the Germans' best chance

By Eise Christensen

The Germans had a real chance of winning on D-Day – if they'd had a different, more focused strategy. This is the opinion of British author Alex Kershaw, who has written several books about D-Day. He points to one man who could have changed the course of the war: Erwin Rommel.

If we look at the big picture, is there any way the Germans could have won the battles on D-Day and repelled the invasion?

Yes, they could. It was difficult and the only real chance they had of pushing the Allies back to the sea was if they had followed General Erwin Rommel's instructions. Rommel was appointed General Inspector of the Atlantic Wall in November 1943, putting him in charge of securing the Atlantic coast against invasion. Unfortunately, it was a bit too late. Until Rommel's appointment, the Germans had focused on building bunkers and hard-to-penetrate coastal defences. Rommel's strategy was to massively strengthen coastal defences with mines, barbed wire and large metal barriers, and to concentrate large tank forces near the beaches of the Atlantic coast. It would have made a difference if Rommel had been appointed earlier.

If we focus on the situation after the first two days of the operation, how would you describe

the state of affairs? What could the Germans realistically have done at this point?

Within two days of the invasion, things were looking bleak for the Germans. But they could have gambled everything on bringing large tank forces from the rest of Western Europe to the beaches after they realised the invasion was underway. That would have made a difference. While the Allies were materially superior to the Germans, and the Germans lacked crucial air support, the fighting in Normandy demonstrated that the Germans fought effectively on the ground even without air support. The battles in Normandy were gruelling and some of the toughest of the war. The cost was high for the Allies, even with total materiel superiority, and had the Germans had better air support, the outcome could very easily have been very, very different.

Consider what happened at Omaha Beach, where aerial bombardment had no effect. There, the Allies encountered heavy resistance, slowing the advance considerably and causing huge losses to the invasion force. If the Germans could have defended themselves in this way with air superiority and sent their well-trained armoured forces to the area, everything could have been different.

The Battle of Caen provides a good picture of how the fighting in Normandy could have turned out if the Germans had been better supplied and had air support – and if Hitler had listened to Rommel. The Canadians were already on the outskirts of Caen on the afternoon of 6th June – just hours after they had landed. The city is only 13 kilometres from the invasion beaches and was one of the Allies' most important targets. Caen itself was supposed to be secured on D-Day, but despite the fact that the Canadians were almost at the city on 6th June, it took six weeks to capture it. It says something about how difficult and

The Germans came closest to stopping the invasion at Omaha. According to Kershaw, only concentrated armoured forces could have halted the Allies.





evenly matched the fighting was that it took so long to move 13 km. The city was only won after massive Allied bombardments, which left it in ruins. It was a war of attrition, with victory secured solely by the Allies' massive air forces.

Wasn't the Battle of Normandy already lost for the Germans after D-Day?

No, the battle was not lost. The Allies were not assured of success until the final breakout from the beaches took place. On D Day, the invasion force was still concentrated in a fairly small area, with their backs to the water. This small area limited the ability to get supplies and reinforcements ashore, so even though the Allies managed to get huge amounts of supplies and thousands of men ashore on D-Day, it was not enough to withstand a massive German counter attack. So, the invasion was still in danger as long as the Allies were trapped in the beachheads and had not secured a proper harbour, such as those in the cities of Cherbourg and Le Havre.

When it comes to air supremacy, it is often said that the Luftwaffe couldn't possibly have won when up against the Allies' mass production of planes. Do you agree?

Yes, I agree that the German factories would not have been able to keep up with the Allies. But despite what you hear about Allied air supremacy, the Luftwaffe had an effect on the Allied advance. The attacks from German aircraft helped to delay the Allies as early as D-Day, including the advance towards Caen.

Of course, the Luftwaffe was so massively outnumbered that it couldn't keep up the fight in the long run, but if the Germans had had more fighter planes at their disposal at that point, they could have gained the upper hand. This is especially true if they had managed to

systemise the production of powerful jets, such as the Me 262, and provided the Western Front with these new technologically advanced planes. That would have changed everything.

However, not enough of those planes had been put into production at that point, and the aircraft was not fully tested and ready to join battle groups. In any case, there were never more than 200 in operation at any one time. [The Messerschmitt Me 262 was introduced in April 1944, but the aircraft did not take part in operations against the Allies until August 1944.]

In your opinion, what was the biggest mistake that the Germans made on D-Day?

The Germans' biggest strategic mistake of all was choosing Hitler. It may sound trite, but the problem was that Hitler's cult of personality was so strong that no one dared make decisions without his approval, and Hitler considered himself an excellent military strategist – he

Alex Kershaw points out one of the places where a German bunker was located on Omaha.



ALEX KERSHAW (born 1966)

Alex Kershaw is a British journalist, speaker and author of several best-selling books, including *The Liberator*, *The Bedford Boys* and *The Longest Winter*. He has also written *The First Wave*, which is based on eyewitness accounts from the soldiers who were the first to set foot in Normandy.

Allied forces were still fighting in Normandy when Paris was liberated. A testament to the fierce battles.

wasn't. Under Hitler's leadership, power was concentrated in one person – or at least, in a very small group of lunatics and sociopaths who paralysed the army leadership. This was a huge mistake, because the Germans had many incredibly skilled and competent generals – such as Rommel – but they were not allowed to fulfil their role. Had Rommel had more say, D Day could easily have failed.

What would Rommel have done differently?

Everything. But crucially, Rommel needed to have been given responsibility in time and allowed to both choose and execute the strategy. In my view, things would have been different if Rommel had

been given sole command of all German tank forces in France from June 1940. Instead, command was divided and it was unclear who was responsible for what and when. If Rommel had been in command, the tanks would certainly have been distributed differently.

In June 1944, the armoured divisions were quite scattered and stationed relatively far from the beach, where they were held in reserve. Rommel wanted to use the forces in a much more concentrated manner, so they could be deployed in a coordinated, powerful attack early on D-Day. Instead, the armoured divisions were left to fight individually and without a common goal.

Rommel would also have strengthened the coastal defences if he'd had more influence. More



Rommel anticipated exactly how the invasion would unfold and was well on his way to building an effective counter-defence. ■ Alex Kershaw on Rommel's strategy.

obstacles on the beaches, more mines and more inland positions. He had intensified this work in his few months in charge of the Atlantic Wall, while fortifying the landscape behind the beaches with tall wooden poles that made it impossible for gliders to land. Rommel anticipated exactly how the invasion would unfold and was well on his way to building an effective counter-defence when the invasion came. Unfortunately for the Germans, Rommel ran out of time.

The battles of D-Day were fought on multiple fronts and involved planes, ships, paratroopers and soldiers in landing craft. Where and when did the decisive breakthrough come?

The decisive breakthrough, I believe, came in the days after D-Day, when the Allies began to gain ground and make the beachhead more secure. At the same time, more and more equipment was brought ashore, and the Germans' materiel superiority began to lessen. Bear in mind that – despite the difficulties – the Germans had more tanks and men in Normandy, even after D-Day. Of the battles after 6th June, those for the high ground along the River Orne would be the most decisive. The area was captured by the

British Ox and Bucks (Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry), and for a long time, things did not look good for the Allies. The German counter-attacks were particularly fierce, because they recognised the strategic importance of controlling the areas along the Orne. They attacked with all their ground artillery, including mortars. The fighting was constant and fierce, and lasted for two bloody weeks.

Why was the fighting there so crucial?

If the British hadn't held their position, the Germans would have fortified the heights on the banks of the Orne. From artillery positions there, they would have been able to fire on Omaha, Sword, Gold and Juno. The entire eastern portion of the Allied beachhead would have been subjected to

constant bombardment, making it deadly to move supplies and men into the beachhead. It would have changed the whole situation.

German control of the Orne would also have had an impact on the capture of Caen. A German capture of the high ground would have made it difficult for the Canadians to advance towards Caen, as they would have been under constant German fire. So, if I had to pick the most critical battle in the days after D-Day, it would have to be the battle for the high ground at Orne.

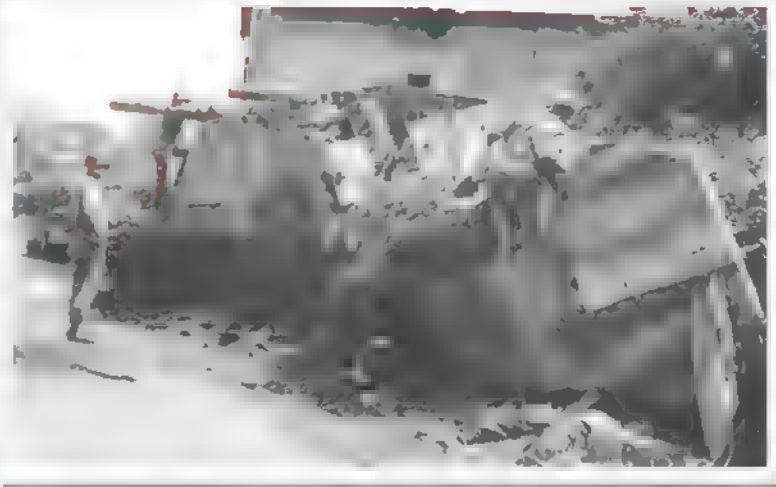
Did any units or individual soldiers stand out during the fighting?

The Ox and Bucks under the command of Major John Howard fought bravely and persistently. If you read the bulletins, you'll see that the fighting was among the fiercest of the entire invasion. You can also see that none of the military leaders – not Bernard Montgomery, Dwight D Eisenhower or Omar Bradley – were confident at any point before or during the invasion that the operation would succeed. The success of the landing was far from assured before the Allies broke out from the beaches in earnest.

You've interviewed many D-Day survivors. What was their perception of the fighting?

The British, Americans and Canadians were not fighting to liberate France, but to get into German territory and end the war. On D-Day, there was much more at stake than the average soldier realised.

They realised it was the longest day, but not that it was also the most important day of the entire war on the Western Front. ■



Allied air forces destroyed the Germans' attempts to send reinforcements to the fighting.



The Battle of Carentan was brutal. The Germans realised the strategic importance of the small town, and the Americans paid dearly for their victory.

Battle of Carentan 10th-13th June

INVASION'S TOUGHEST CITY BATTLE

We had to take this town
called Carentan, and it
was straight ahead.

Invasion's toughest city battle

After D-Day, only one thing stood in the way of the US forces from the Omaha and Utah landing beaches uniting and advancing into France: the small town of Carentan. So, German General Erich Marck commanded his battle-hardened paratroopers to defend it. The order was to hold the town at all cost.

The small town of Carentan, just 14 kilometres from the Normandy coast, didn't draw much attention in the early days of June 1944. Narrow streets wound around the town's medieval church, Notre Dame de Carentan, founded in the 12th century. Outside the town, between high hedges and lush orchards, cows grazed peacefully. With a large dairy on the outskirts of the settlement, cattle were the main source of income for the town's 4,000 inhabitants.

But the idyll was not to last. From 10th to 13th June, Carentan became the centre of some of the most intense fighting of World War II. The town was vital to both the Germans and the Allies. Without control of Carentan, the scattered Allied forces from the Omaha and Utah beach landings could not join forces and continue into France as a united front. And if the Germans lost the town, they would not only be unable to stop the Allied advance, but would also find it very difficult to receive reinforcements and supplies of troops, food and ammunition from German units

further inland. From Hitler, the order was clear: Carentan had to be defended at all cost.

Americans feared German hordes

A quick glance at a map reveals why Carentan was so crucial. Like the centre of a spider's web, the town brought together a network of important roads and railway lines. The double-track railway from Paris to Cherbourg ran through it, while the main road from the port city of Cherbourg to the strategically important cities of Caen and Saint Lô cut through its centre. Anyone in control of the Normandy town could freely move equipment, troops and supplies to the landing beaches from multiple directions. As General Maxwell Taylor's staff officers stated even before D-Day, the town was *"the channel through which Germany could pour its hordes upon our landing forces while they struggled through the water and sought a shaky foothold on the landing beaches"*.

Carentan's importance was perhaps even more obvious on 7th June, the day after D-Day. The US ▶

On D-Day, 21,000 Americans landed on Utah Beach with only minor casualties. By 10th June, the men were still isolated from the soldiers on the other beaches.



Carentan was the crucial hub

Three days after D-Day on 10th June, the US troops at Utah Beach remained isolated from the rest of the invasion force, which had created a beachhead further east. To unify the beachhead and ensure troops could easily move around the area under Allied control, Carentan had to be taken.

The town was located on the road from Paris via Caen to Cherbourg, which was also of enormous strategic importance. Cherbourg was the nearest major port, and if it was captured, the Allies would be able to bring in huge amounts of supplies and men. Capturing

Carentan would also cut off the strong German force based in Cherbourg from vital supplies to make a speedy capture of the important harbour more likely.

For the other German troops in Normandy, the fall of Carentan would be a disaster, too. Train tracks and several key roads ran through the town, and reinforcements and troop movements would be severely hampered without control of the town. Therefore, US troops went all out to secure control of Carentan, and the US generals were willing to pay a high price for its capture.

Carentan
FRANCE



The Allies had air supremacy. They used this to bomb Carentan and other places.

Utah Beach

The beach was 17 kilometres from Carentan, and on D-Day the Americans managed to advance 10 kilometres inland. By 10th June - the day of the attack - paratroopers had reached the approaches to the small but crucial town.

--- Front line on 9th June
Allied bridgehead

0 10 20 km



Carentan

Situated where the Douve River flows out into the English Channel, the town has existed since Gaulish times and was known as the capital of the marshes because it's built within a giant swamp. The Germans used its location to flood large areas around the town, effectively turning it into a fortress island.

The four other beaches

On D-Day, the Canadians on Juno and the British on Gold had created a common beachhead. On 7th June, they made contact with Sword Beach, and by 8th June, all four eastern beaches were united into a common beachhead. Only Utah Beach was missing.

NORMANDY

forces from Omaha and Utah Beaches were advancing, but had not yet joined up, as planned.

The hole in the Allied beachhead in Europe put the forces in a vulnerable position and prevented the Allies from quickly advancing further into German-occupied France. To connect Utah Beach with the other Allied beaches, the Americans had to take Carentan, which was heavily fortified and lay between the two US forces. General Dwight D Eisenhower, on board a minelayer, inspected the beaches and then gave the order to occupy the town. The task fell to the elite US parachute unit, the 101st Airborne. It soon became clear that its mission would be anything but easy to accomplish.

Carentan was a natural fortress

Carentan's location makes it a natural fortress. The settlement was built by Roman Gaulish tribes who founded the town on low land in the middle of marshes, crossed by several rivers. To improve the area's drainage, Carentan's inhabitants, over time, built canals, a feature that Napoleon Bonaparte used to flood the area and turn the town into a fortified island. German paratroopers also used the emperor's trick. By flooding the fields around Carentan, they turned the area into impassable marshland.

The landscape wasn't the only challenge. When the Americans arrived, the elite 6th *Fallschirmjäger* (Airborne) Regiment led by Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich von der Heydte was waiting for them. He had already made his mark in the Battle of Crete, a 1941 operation carried out by paratroopers who were supported by mountain troops. The colonel's efforts had helped secure the Germans victory and earned him the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

Von der Heydte was prepared to put up stiff resistance to the Allies. He had no choice – before he and his forces had fortified Carentan, on Hitler's orders he had solemnly signed a pledge to defend the position to the last man. Facing von der Heydte was

General Maxwell Taylor, who wanted to take the town with a pincer manoeuvre, where one group would swing around the town via main roads to capture it, while another would move along a long, straight approach road that crossed the River Douve and several canals.

The soldiers would have to travel more than two kilometres on the exposed narrow road and cross four bridges to reach their objective: a hill to the south west, from where they could fire upon and stop fleeing German forces and reinforcements.

The Americans expected Carentan to be only lightly protected, so the plan looked good on paper – but nowhere else. The road with the four bridges into Carentan was actually on top of a narrow two-kilometre-long causeway. In some places, the causeway rose two metres above the surrounding landscape, leaving the soldiers exposed to fire from both sides as soon as they started moving along the road. Only small ditches on either side provided minimal shelter and safety. One of those taking part



ERICH MARCKS (1891-1944)

The German forces on the Cotentin Peninsula, where Carentan is located, were led by General Erich Marcks. Aged 19, he enlisted in the army, then fought in World War I, quickly rising through the ranks. Hitler had so much faith in Marcks that he tasked the general with outlining a plan for the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Marcks himself took part in the fighting on the Eastern Front, where he lost his left leg. Marcks was wounded in an Allied air raid six days after D-Day and died of his wounds on 12th June 1944.



They knew we were coming down the road into Carentan, and we just kept right on going. ■ Paratrooper James Flanagan on the first attack on the road to Carentan.

In the attack, James Flanagan of the US parachute regiment, remembered the march towards Carentan beginning on the morning of 10th June:

"I remember our regiment leading off the initial attack on the causeway leading into Carentan. I remember the road was long and straight with four bridges between us and Carentan. We were strafed and bombed by Junkers Ju 87s. The Germans gave us menacing artillery, mortar and machine gun fire. They knew we were coming down the road into Carentan, and we just kept right on going."

Doctor's son led the attack

Michael Camasso was also taking part in the assault. He had enlisted as a private in the parachute troops, as he'd heard that the pay was higher than in other units. Now he experienced the horrors of war first-hand:

"We had to take this town called Carentan, and it was straight ahead. I met a couple of guys and we were on a road and were going down when the bombs were starting to come, hitting us. My buddy was right there with me. I didn't know him that well, but a bomb

came right over his head and over my head. I jumped in a ditch and I told him, 'Come on, John, jump in here. Get in the ditch. Hurry up.' But he got hit and he got killed. I got his gun and stuck it in the ground and put his helmet on it."

Michael Camasso's comrade was one of the first casualties in the battle for the road on the causeway. Leading the advance was Lieutenant Colonel Robert G Cole with a 700 man battalion. As the son of a military doctor, Cole was practically born into the army. He'd joined up immediately after high school and graduated from the prestigious West Point Military Academy at the age of 34. This training, along with his own war experience, had prepared Cole for most of the challenges a soldier could face in the field. But at the second of the bridges along the final stretch into the town, he faced a serious problem.

The Germans had destroyed the bridge over the Douve, and heavy German fire made it impossible for US Army engineers to rebuild it or create a footbridge for the soldiers to use. Cole and his men stared down into the Douve below the bridge and knew they had to get across at all costs. Cole recalled

"The engineers had not been able to put a footbridge across for the battalion due to heavy shelling ... By being cautious and keeping well▶

FACTS

In total, the Germans had almost 300,000 troops in the vicinity of the invasion area. **In fact, they had twice as many soldiers in the region as the number of Allies who landed on D-Day**

American troops in position outside Carentan. In the background a neutralised German StuG tank destroyer – one of the weapons Allied tank drivers feared the most.

dispersed, we could perhaps stretch a rope across the bridge where it was blown out. And by using some of this fencing there, put a passable footbridge across. This we did, and we finished it up about 15.00. About 15.30, the initial elements of the battalion ... started across."

Under heavy fire, the battalion ploughed onwards, but at the final bridge, the battalion came to a standstill again. The road was blocked by a so-called Belgian gate, a three tonne, three metre high and three metre-wide barrier held up by a four-metre long

support. The gate, which formed part of the German defences, blocked the entire road, making it impossible to advance any further. At the same time, a long retreat along the exposed causeway would be fatal for the US soldiers.

The Germans were still relentlessly shelling the battalion and Cole realised that further advance would be impossible. In exasperation, he ordered the 265 men who were left out of the initial 700 to halt and wait for darkness, which might slow the Germans' bombardment. The march along

Americans died on Purple Heart Lane

A fairly narrow elevated road through flooded fields led into Carentan. Despite the obvious danger, the Americans had to use the causeway to capture the town. It was costly.

Carentan is not only a hub with roads to Normandy's main towns in the north, south and east, but it also lies in the southernmost part of what is known as the Cotentin Peninsula. Right there, near the town of just over 4,000 inhabitants, the River Douve flows into the English Channel. The German

defenders took advantage of the geography. In the period before D-Day, they had opened the dikes around the town and flooded the surrounding fields, leaving Carentan almost isolated as a small island. From the German side to the south, troops and equipment could easily be transported in, but from the US side

the route into the town was via a narrow causeway with flooded fields on either side.

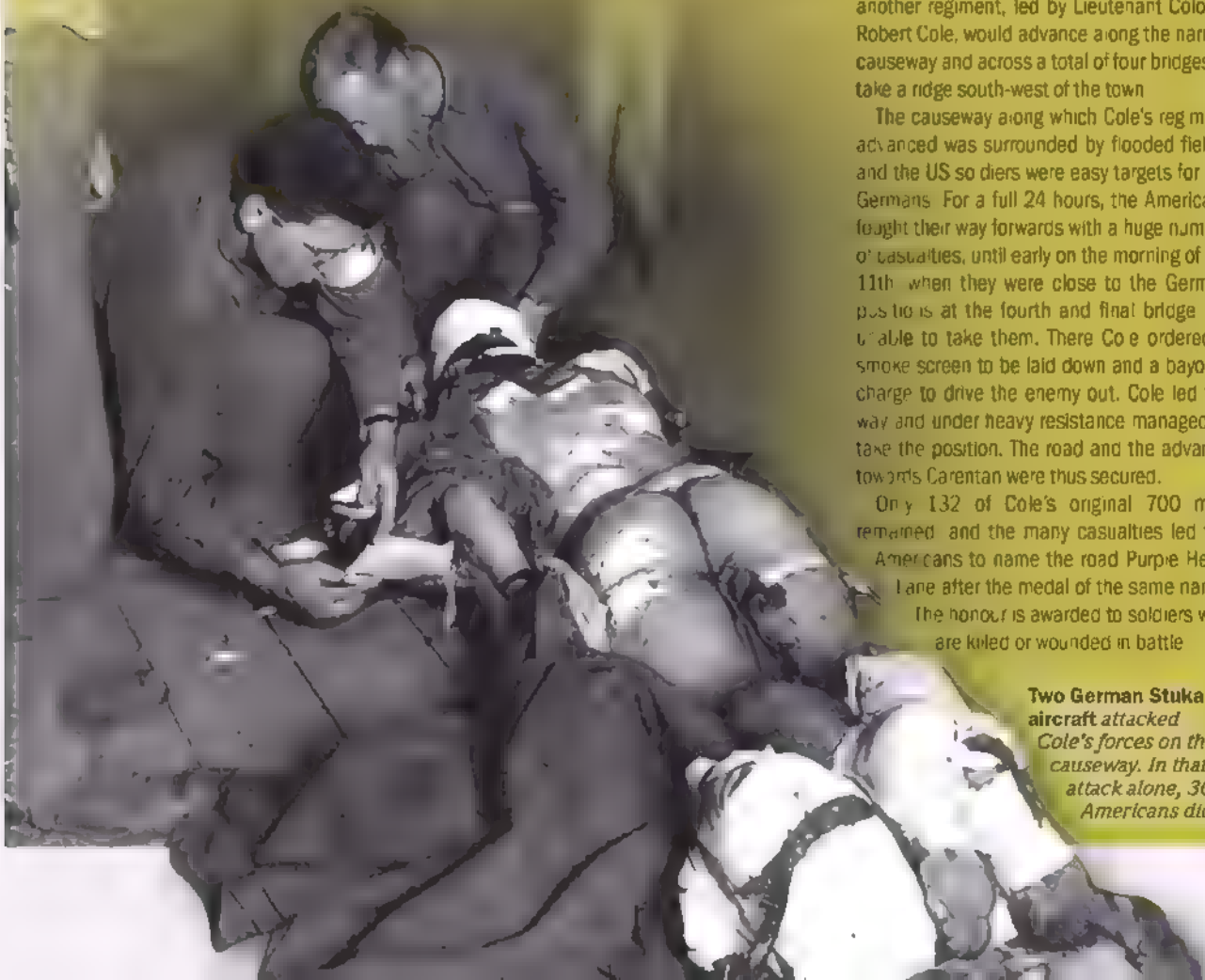
The Nazis had fortified positions, with snipers, tanks and artillery. On 10th June, US soldiers approached the town from the north. In a pincer manoeuvre, one regiment would swing around the town and capture it, while another regiment, led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Cole, would advance along the narrow causeway and across a total of four bridges to take a ridge south-west of the town.

The causeway along which Cole's regiment advanced was surrounded by flooded fields, and the US soldiers were easy targets for the Germans. For a full 24 hours, the Americans fought their way forwards with a huge number of casualties, until early on the morning of the 11th when they were close to the German positions at the fourth and final bridge but unable to take them. There Cole ordered a smoke screen to be laid down and a bayonet charge to drive the enemy out. Cole led the way and under heavy resistance managed to take the position. The road and the advance towards Carentan were thus secured.

Only 132 of Cole's original 700 men remained, and the many casualties led the Americans to name the road Purple Heart Lane after the medal of the same name.

The honour is awarded to soldiers who are killed or wounded in battle.

Two German Stuka aircraft attacked Cole's forces on the causeway. In that attack alone, 30 Americans died.



the road had already cost Cole's battalion dearly, and now they had to crawl into what little shelter they could find at the edge of the ditch as German shells rained down. So many men died or were wounded on the road along the causeway and into the town that the route was later named Purple Heart Lane, a reference to the Purple Heart military decoration awarded to soldiers wounded or killed in battle.

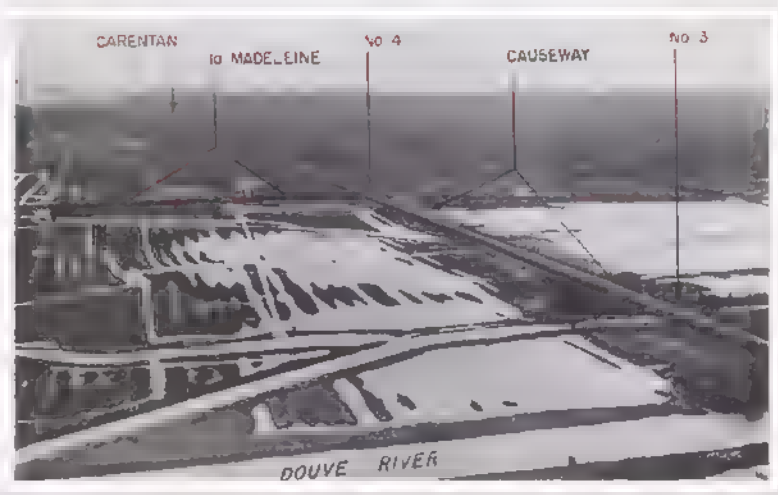
Sheltered in ditch

For Lieutenant Colonel Cole and his men, the situation was critical. Unable to move forwards or back, they were at the mercy of the Germans. Cole later described the hours of that June night spent on the edge of the ditch just outside Carentan:

"The battalion stayed in position along the causeway for the remainder of the afternoon of 10th June. We were unable to do anything ... [because we] were under heavy fire ... We stayed there during the night and at about 00.00, the Nazis bombed us with two planes, which fortunately were soon downed by our own air force."

As night fell, a means of escape arrived. Under cover of darkness, the Americans managed to make a 30-cm hole in the Belgian gate – enough for one man to squeeze through. Then Cole's men began to sneak through when the Germans finally stopped firing.

"About 04.00, we were able to infiltrate men across the bridge one at a time at about one-minute intervals and we got the majority of the battalion pretty well



Purple Heart Lane was a narrow road into Carentan through flooded land. There the Germans could easily fire on the US soldiers.

scattered up along the road and on the field on the other side of the road. At 05.00 we started out on our original objective. At 05.15, however, just as we'd gotten well dispersed and started moving in good fashion, we were fired on ... We had to seek cover wherever we were ... The only solution was either to withdraw back to the bridge and take another chance to get everybody killed withdrawing, to attack this position, or just lie in the ditch and be sniper targets."

For Cole, it was obvious what they had to do. By observing the German signal rockets throughout ▶



The Allies managed to land 200,000 vehicles on D-Day. The tanks, in particular, played an important role during German counter-attacks.

the night, he could see that the majority of the German rockets were fired from a nearby three-acre farm. Even though the enemy was difficult to spot, Cole correctly assessed that the main German force was on the farm and firing on the Americans from there. An attack on the German position was the only option. The problem was that the Germans were so well hidden and skilfully camouflaged that the Americans couldn't see the enemy and fire on them. The lieutenant colonel therefore ordered his men to fix bayonets and prepare for an assault. The tactic had fallen out of favour after World War I, but before that it was effective in driving a hidden enemy out to fight or retreat. Now Cole wanted to try the old strategy against the Germans – because while it would be difficult, the position had to be captured at all costs:

"I called for artillery fire, which I received, then issued the order for bayonet charge to be on the whistle signal. These orders had to be issued verbally because most of the radios were not working, and I had to pass them up and down the ditches on the side of the road and also back through the columns. The orders were pretty well understood, however, and on the whistle signal,

three quarters of the battalion rose up out of the ditches and charged.

"The initial objective [was] the orchard the other side of the [farm]house. Due to the intense fighting and the many machine gun positions, dug in positions, many men got scattered out. What it involved was the fight of individuals against individual machine gun nests."

The Germans whom the Americans fought were not only good marksmen, they were also good at camouflaging their positions, Cole recalled:

"The orchard behind the house was filled with [dugouts], very well concealed and very well covered, and offered excellent protection for the men in them. In individual cases, you had Germans using wood piles and buildings, and climbing up in trees and using any natural thing.

"They're very, very hard to get out. You can't see them. You're up on them ... and the first thing you know, somebody's shooting at you from the rear with a machine gun. Coming across this field, we were exposed to these men in hedgerows. They had us perfectly covered, so it's simply a matter of getting across the open ground as quickly as

US artillery
hammered away
at German lines
before the decisive
attack on the Purple
Heart Lane position.





possible and getting in amongst them. This fighting went on pretty heavily until about 10.00 and then it's slackening down. Around 11.00, however, the Nazis came back at it and we pushed 'em off again."

As many as 130 of Cole's remaining 265 men were killed or wounded during the attack on the German positions protecting the last bridge and the approach road to Carentan. The capture and securing of Purple Heart Lane had been costly, but crucial. Only now could the Americans advance and take the ridge south-west of the town, from where they could fire on the Germans in Carentan – but to the Americans' horror, the battle for the farm was not yet over.

Americans threatened and flattered

During Cole's fighting, the regiment's 1st Battalion had now also arrived, and Robert Cole asked them to step up and take the fight to the Germans. But they, too, had suffered heavy casualties, especially during the crossing of the last bridge, where they had been constantly exposed to mortar shells. The many dead and wounded prompted General Taylor, from his headquarters, to order his officers to negotiate an armistice with the Germans so that both sides could collect their dead and treat the wounded.

Taylor used the pause in the fighting to give Friedrich von der Heydte the opportunity to surrender. Two German prisoners of war, accompanied by US soldiers in a jeep bearing a white flag, delivered the message at a German outpost a little further away from the farm.

The demand for surrender was written in German and, although accompanied by threats of continued bombardment, also included the flattering remark, *"Bravery has been well served."*

The commander of the forward post, Sergeant Mager, immediately contacted von der Heydte by radio. The lieutenant colonel, whose hands were tied by his promise to Hitler, responded promptly.

"Would you surrender in the same situation?" was the caustic response.

To eliminate any doubt that the response was serious, von der Heydte ordered his officers to launch a heavy bombardment from the southern outskirts of the neighbouring town of Saint-Côme-du-Mont. What the Americans didn't realise was that the shells were the unit's last. The Germans were short of ammunition after the intense defence, and on the morning of 11th June, the Allies controlled several bridges and roads, while from the air, Allied planes bombarded the German columns of reinforcements. The Nazis also lacked vehicles and fuel, resulting in few supplies getting through to the defending forces.

German soldier Eugen Griesser remembered how his ammo was already running low on the first day of the attack and how the situation was deteriorating: ►

MEDAL OF HONOR

Robert G. Cole

Rank: Lieutenant Colonel

Medal awarded: 11th June 1944

Location: Carentan, France



Cole received highest order

Robert G Cole paved the way for the capture of Carentan with his daring bayonet charge on 11th June 1944. For his efforts, he was nominated for the US Medal of Honor. Below is the original Congressional citation for awarding the Medal of Honor to Robert Cole.

For gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his own life, above and beyond the call of duty on 11th June 1944, in France.

Lieutenant Colonel Cole was personally leading his battalion in forcing the last four bridges on the road to Carentan when his entire unit was suddenly pinned to the ground by intense and withering enemy rifle, machine gun, mortar and artillery fire placed upon them from well-prepared and heavily fortified positions within 150 yards of the foremost elements.

After the devastating and unceasing enemy fire had for over one hour prevented any move and inflicted numerous casualties, Lieutenant Colonel Cole, observing this almost hopeless situation, courageously issued orders to assault the enemy positions with fixed bayonets.

With utter disregard for his own safety and completely ignoring the enemy fire, he rose to his feet in front of his battalion and with drawn pistol shouted to his men to follow him in the assault. Catching up a fallen man's rifle and bayonet, he charged on and led the remnants of his battalion across the bullet swept open ground and into the enemy position. His heroic and valiant action in so inspiring his men resulted in the complete establishment of our bridgehead across the Douve River.

The cool fearlessness, personal bravery, and outstanding leadership displayed by Lieutenant Colonel Cole reflect great credit upon himself and are worthy of the highest praise in the military service.



The Medal of Honor is the US Army's highest decoration. It is awarded to members of the armed forces who have shown exceptional bravery in combat.

"On the evening of 10th June, I only had a little ammunition left for my sub machine gun: two full magazines on my belt in a bag and one in the weapon. Because we barely received any ammunition resupplies, I had little more than my pistol, the bayonet, the spade and a few hand grenades. The war could not be won with this meagre arsenal, however, and some of my comrades had it even worse off."

But von der Heydte did not give up. Instead, he ordered his men to hold their positions until the very last cartridge was fired.

Reinforcements fled

By mid-afternoon, it was clear that the defending forces were stretched to the limit. Allied aircraft were constantly attacking the Nazi positions, and the German soldiers holding the area to the left of the road towards the

nearby town of Saint Côme du Mont were under heavy mortar fire. Lieutenant Colonel von der Heydte also received the disheartening news that elements of two German battalions that had fought their way to Carentan as reinforcements had turned back, probably in horror at the Allied firepower on land and in the air.

The tank forces that had been so effective four years earlier when Germany occupied France couldn't come to the rescue of Carentan's German defenders this time.

The nearest powerful force, the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division, had been stationed in Bordeaux and was now creeping towards Carentan along the roads of Normandy. The tanks were low on fuel and could only drive at night to avoid the constant fire from Allied aircraft, so were severely delayed. Von der Heydte

Engineering troops quickly built a pontoon bridge across the Douve River once the road to Carentan is secured. Now heavy equipment could be deployed in earnest to gain the upper hand.

Purple Heart Lane and the defensive positions behind it are captured. The German counter-attack is slowed down.

Carentan is captured and the Germans are driven back in heavy fighting. Further US advances are slowed by the Germans.

Forces from German armoured divisions launch a powerful counter-attack but are finally slowed down.

and his handful of men were left to fend for themselves.

After a few hours of fierce fighting, the Americans managed to enter Carentan itself. They'd been able to build two improvised pontoon bridges in order to move men and equipment across the river. Fierce fighting began in the narrow streets of the town, but von der Heydte knew that US tanks would soon come rolling in.

Realising that the situation was untenable, von der Heydte ordered the majority of his forces to withdraw and regroup on the outskirts of the town, while the rest – including snipers – continued fighting in the centre.

In a report to his superiors in the 91st Air Landing Division, he described his situation: "All leaders of

Jager companies have fallen or been wounded. Hardest fighting on the city limits of Carentan. The last of the ammunition has been fired; at 18.00 we will vacate Carentan and fall back to Pommenauque. This line can only be held if ammunition and provisions arrive."

Pommenauque, to which von der Heydte ordered his forces to retreat, was a small farm complex on the outskirts of Carentan. He would take up the fight from there. Eugen Griesser, who held a position in the town's railway station, realised the gravity of the situation when the commander-in-chief stopped by to give his order and inspect the position:

"In Carentan train station, my unit held the baggage storage rooms. During a break in the firing, the commander [von der Heydte], ▶





The West Australian

16th June 1944

Battle of expansion

Within a week of the Normandy invasion General Montgomery was able to announce that the battle of the beaches had been won by the assault forces under his command. The battle which is now being fought well back from the beaches with growing bitterness and intensity is the battle to gain momentum in the inland drive. General Montgomery has won the room for deployment and manoeuvre of the forces that have been put ashore in the bridgehead.

He is probing strongly for weak points in the German defensive system and he is forcing on Field Marshal Rommel a good deal of improvisation in local resistance. But until the Allied armies can gain the mobility to expand the attack into a major break-through into northern France, it cannot be said that the invasion has been fully established or even that the Atlantic Wall has been breached.

It is misleading to visualise this "wall" as a concrete barricade around the western coastline of Europe or as represented merely by such fixed fortifications and batteries as have been constructed overlooking the shores. The severity of the task of the invading armies can be better understood if

the Atlantic Wall is seen in its proper perspective as a system of defence in depth that has been organised in accordance with every advantage of the terrain, and which must be considered in relation to the strength of the German field forces operating within it. What the enemy is hoping to do along the Atlantic Wall is to prevent the expansion of the Normandy or any other bridgehead and to contain the invading forces within the defence system long enough to enable the preparation of a counter-attack for their defeat. In this broad conception, the German defence system has not yet been penetrated in any decisive fashion.

Evidence has been forthcoming of the inevitable fluctuations to be expected in this developing battle as counter-attack follows attack in the effort to check the advance of the Allied spearheads. Particularly notable is the German recapture, however temporary, of Montebourg and Troan, as well as the confused situation still existing around our deepest point of inland penetration in the Caumont Villers Bocage sector below Bayeux.

The Germans are fighting strongly to contain and constrict both Allied flanks and in between they have evidently been trying to drive two wedges to the coast in order to break up the bridgehead.

The West Australian is still Australia's most widely read newspaper. The paper followed developments in the fighting in Normandy on a daily basis.

Hauptmann Mager, Hauptmann Hermann and another Oberjager came over to us.

"What's the status with you?" the major asked.

"We can still give the Americans hell," I said. "But when the ammunition's gone, it will be difficult."

"The commander knew how serious the situation was, because the other sections had the same to report.

"Hang in there as long as possible," he said.

"Then he unfolded a map and showed us the prepared positions in the rear.

"Before the [support] fire is completely stopped, pull your men back to here," he said to Hauptmann Mager and Hauptmann Hermann.

"As he left, he patted me encouragingly on the shoulder and moved on, ducking."

Around midnight on the night of 12th June, as the Germans began to withdraw from the town, the Allies launched a heavy bombardment. Flanagan, one of the few survivors of the fighting on the road into Carentan, remembered the night fighting in the French town:

"You couldn't see anything at night. Everyone in my platoon was hosing down the countryside with his weapons. Every now and then somebody was hit. The Germans couldn't see us in the dark. They fired a couple rounds here and a couple there, anticipating our movement. We lost a lot of men. We were in bad shape. My platoon had suffered about 20 [men killed in action]."

German snipers in Carentan's houses continued to fire on the Americans, but during the night and the following day, US troops largely cleared the town of enemies. Michael Camasso, whose comrade had been killed on Purple Heart Lane, witnessed how some Germans willingly surrendered during the final battles as defeat became clear:

"I walked in a barn and I turned my back to walk out [when] a German hollered: 'Hände hoch!' ['Hands up!'] He said it to himself. He could have shot me right there. He had a gun, but he came down. He was an older man and I don't think he was ready to do that. So, he came down and I took him up to the company and they made a prisoner of war out of him."

SS came to the rescue

On the night of 12th June while von der Heydte's men were establishing a new line of defence just outside the town — Ju 52 transport planes flew over the area and dropped 13 tonnes of supplies south-west of Carentan. Von der Heydte immediately asked for another shipment from the 1st Parachute Army, which was based in Nancy, in north-eastern France. The army couldn't promise anything, he was told, and the supplies on 12th June were the last von der Heydte received from the air.

During the following day, the Americans cleared the small pockets of resistance around the town,

The West Australian.
VIGILANS ET AUDAX.
PERTH.

One Hundred and Twelfth Year
of Publication.

FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 1944.

BATTLE OF EXPANSION.

Within a week of the Normandy invasion General Montgomery was able to announce that the battle of the beaches had been won by the assault forces under his command. The battle which is now being fought well back from the beaches with growing bitterness and intensity is the battle to gain momentum in the inland drive. General Montgomery has won the room for deployment and manoeuvre of the forces that have been put ashore in the bridgehead.

but the Germans were far from defeated. After strategically retreating to Pommenauque, they continued to the small town of Donville, one kilometre from Carentan. There they would gather strength and reorganise their forces before moving in on the town again in a counter-attack. The 6th Fallschirm Jäger-Regiment had even been reinforced. The 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division, which had been moving towards Carentan over the previous nights, had arrived. They were now preparing to put up strong opposition as the Allies began the fight to drive the Germans from the new position at Donville.

Among the US soldiers moving towards Donville on 12th June was Richard 'Dick' Winters of the 101st Airborne's 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. He had been dropped in the hours before D-Day near Sainte-Mère-Église and was now part of the fighting for Carentan. Winters remembered his platoon being sent to Donville to defeat the Germans and prevent the recapture of Carentan:

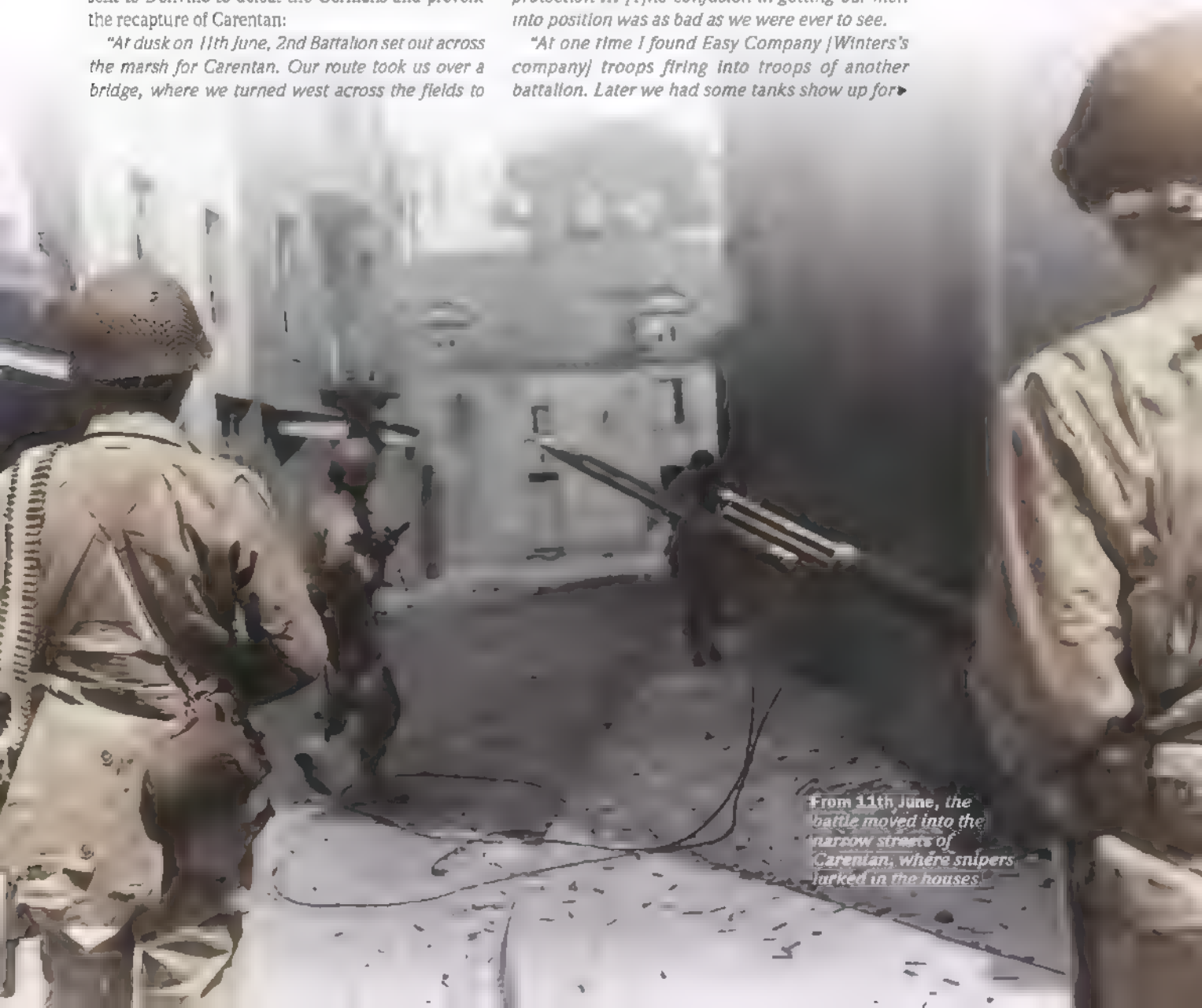
"At dusk on 11th June, 2nd Battalion set out across the marsh for Carentan. Our route took us over a bridge, where we turned west across the fields to

railroad tracks. The going was very rough as we crossed swampy areas and hedgerows ... During this movement, 2nd Battalion continually broke contact with its organic companies ... All told, it was a rough night. We stopped, dug in, set up machine guns and bazookas, moved out, over and over. We finally crossed the Douve River in front of Carentan around 02.00 on the morning of 12th June."

When Winters and his unit encountered the Germans in Donville on 12th June, they were met with unexpectedly stiff resistance:

"As soon as the regiment and the division assembled, we began to pursue the retreating Germans. For the first two miles, there was little or no resistance. Then we ran smack into heavy enemy fire. The Germans had established a defence on the high ground to the west of Carentan. They had excellent fields of fire and heavy hedgerows for protection ... [T]he confusion in getting our men into position was as bad as we were ever to see.

"At one time I found Easy Company [Winters's company] troops firing into troops of another battalion. Later we had some tanks show up for



From 11th June, the battle moved into the narrow streets of Carentan, where snipers lurked in the houses

support, and they began firing into our own line. By dark, however, order had been established. We were immediately resupplied with food, water and ammunition."

For Winters and the other paratroopers who, since D-Day, had fought their way forward metre by metre through difficult terrain, surrounded by enemies, nerves got the better of them, and in the battle for Donville, which continued on the night of 12th-13th June, it almost went disastrously wrong, Winters recalled:

"[O]ur lines witnessed wild confusion that evening. The retreating enemy hollered and shot bursts from their burp [sub-machine] guns throughout the night.

Shortly after midnight, a German patrol crossed in the middle of the field between the two lines and fired their weapons. The sound scared the hell out of me. For a few minutes I half expected a full blown night attack. On one of our outposts, Sergeant Floyd Talbert took his pistol and gently tapped Private GH Smith on the head to wake him. Smith was so confused and scared to be awakened so suddenly that he turned and bayoneted Talbert. In later years ... Talbert recalled, 'I could have shot the bastard six times as he lunged toward me, but I didn't think we could spare a man at the time '"

The confusion in the darkness of night was one thing, the force that hit the Americans as dawn broke the next morning was another. On 13th June 1944, the Germans made their last desperate and violent attempt to beat back the Americans. However, the US forces were now assembled and ready to fight the decisive test of strength between the Germans and the Americans was about to take place

"At approximately 05.30, all hell broke loose as we prepared our final attack to drive the enemy



The explosions were terrific and a blast of searing heat threw me to the ground. ■ Private Ed Shames, who had taken cover behind a tank just before the Germans hit it.

from the outskirts of Carentan. Both sides opened up with artillery, mortars, machine guns and rifle fire – everything we had, and I am sure everything they had,” Winters recalled.

“There was a hail of firepower going in both directions. Under that intense fire, our sister company broke and ran. They did so without permission from battalion headquarters. Their withdrawal exposed Easy Company’s left flank, as well as Dog Company’s right flank. With their flank in the air, D Company also retreated.

“Easy Company was now alone on the front line, with the flooded area on our right flank, nobody on our left flank. We held fast. A German tank attempted to break through the hedgerow on our left ... Lieutenant Welsh and his bazooka man, Private John McGrath, ran out... right in the path of the oncoming tank. As the tank ... penetrated the hedgerow, Welsh and McGrath sent a bazooka round through its unarmoured underbelly.”

Two tanks exploded

Company F, one of the companies that had withdrawn during the battle, also came into close contact with ▶



The Allies had bombed the important railway line through Carentan on D Day. This prevented German equipment from reaching the US sector.

The devastation in Normandy was massive. Hundreds of small towns lay in ruins after Allied bombardments and heavy fighting. The invasion cost around 20,000 French civilians their lives.



the newly arrived German armoured forces. Ralph Bennett remembered how, while some comrades were hiding in a hedge, he got an unpleasant surprise:

"Ken Christianson, Clark Heggeness, 'Mac' McCullough and Leo Lecuyer all made it into the hedgerow ahead of me. I could see Christianson urgently motioning me to join him. I was wondering what to do next when an enemy machine gun opened up on them. At that precise moment, a German SPG [self propelled gun] came lumbering along the road from Donville and stopped directly opposite me. The chassis took up the whole width of the road and it was the first time I'd seen a gun of this size close up."

Bennett escaped the encounter unharmed, but things didn't go quite so smoothly when Ed Shames, a comrade from Company F, took cover behind a line of US tanks. The

German SPG was designed to fight enemy tanks and demonstrated its power to the full:

"As the tanks came up beside me, I rose to my feet and trotted alongside, using them as a shield from the German machine-gun fire ... Suddenly a couple of 75-mm rounds went through the lead vehicle and into the tank directly behind it. The shots had been fired at point blank range and the lightly armoured M5s didn't stand a chance."

"The explosions were terrific and a blast of searing heat threw me to the ground, scorching my face and eyebrows. The third tank started backing out and as it did so, I picked myself up and ran. My clothes were smouldering and my ears ringing but other than that I was OK."

More men required to secure victory

For a few hours, it seems as though the German counter-attack would break the US lines. Only a few men held out from hastily established defensive positions, while German tanks and paratroopers threw everything they had into breaking through the defence lines and retaking Carentan. After four days of fighting, a costly advance via Purple Heart Lane, urban combat in narrow streets and now defensive



After four days of fighting, Carentan was finally captured and all counter-attacks repelled. The road to Cherbourg and Caen was now open.



fighting in the Normandy hedgerows, the Battle of Carentan was in its decisive phase on the morning of 13th June. Fortunately, the US Army command had realised the danger and ordered 60 tanks and infantrymen to Carentan. They arrived mid-afternoon and drove the Germans back – the Allies' materiel superiority struck once again. Bill Gaubraith, a private in the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, later recalled:

"I think the Krauts had just about had a belly full of us, in our sector at least, and had quit. We covered the withdrawal without firing a single shot, which was very fortunate because we didn't really have enough ammunition. At around 15.00, we got back to where the battalion had set up a new defence line. Shortly after that, 1st Battalion 502nd came up with tank support and relieved us ... We then watched men from the 502nd, together with the tanks from 2nd Armored, move past and the soldiers taunted us, saying we weren't man enough to finish the job. We'd been hard at it for nearly 11 hours and I was utterly exhausted they had no idea what we'd been through."

Locals were affected

With the arrival of the US tanks, the Germans realised that the battle was lost. They were massively outnumbered and out of ammunition, while Allied aircraft prevented reinforcements from reaching them. The Battle of Carentan ended on 13th June. In total, more than 350 US soldiers had lost their lives,

while many more had been hit and wounded. The losses were just as high for the Germans. There are no official sources for German casualty figures, but historians estimate that up to 400 Germans died in the four-day battle, and as with the Americans, hundreds of German paratroopers were also wounded in the battle. The actions not only affected the soldiers. The French population was now also feeling the savagery of war and the cost of liberation. Yvette Tesson, aged 13 in 1944, lived in the nearby town of Corbeaumeville:

"About 13th June ... my parents, like many others, had dug a shelter in the field in front of the house in a former dry pond. We were refugees in the shelter and the shells were falling from all sides when a shell fell on our house without destroying it. We could see the sky through the hole made by the shell ... I still have the memory of having seen trucks full of dead German soldiers with their feet sticking out of trailers. The Germans were collecting their dead ... Some Germans gave us sweets a few times, probably we think they were doing that to all the children."

Around 20,000 French civilians lost their lives during nearly three months of the Battle of Normandy. But, on 30th August 1944, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces Dwight D Eisenhower declared the battle won. By then, Paris had been liberated and Allied forces were storming north through France, heading for the Netherlands and Belgium. The Battle of Normandy was over. ■

When the port of Cherbourg was captured in August 1944, there was nothing left to stop the Allies. Huge numbers of men and materiel now poured into France.

AT THE SAME TIME

ICELAND:

- Formally declared itself independent of Denmark.

LIBYAN LIBERTY:

- A British pilot shot down a German V1 missile for the first time

PHILIPPINES:

- US submarines sank two Japanese aircraft carriers during the battle for the Philippine Sea.

EUROPE – June 1944





US troops landing
on Omaha Beach
in the late afternoon
of 6th June 1944.

Calais

BELGIUM

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A Canadian paramedic attends to two French children in the British sector shortly after D-Day.

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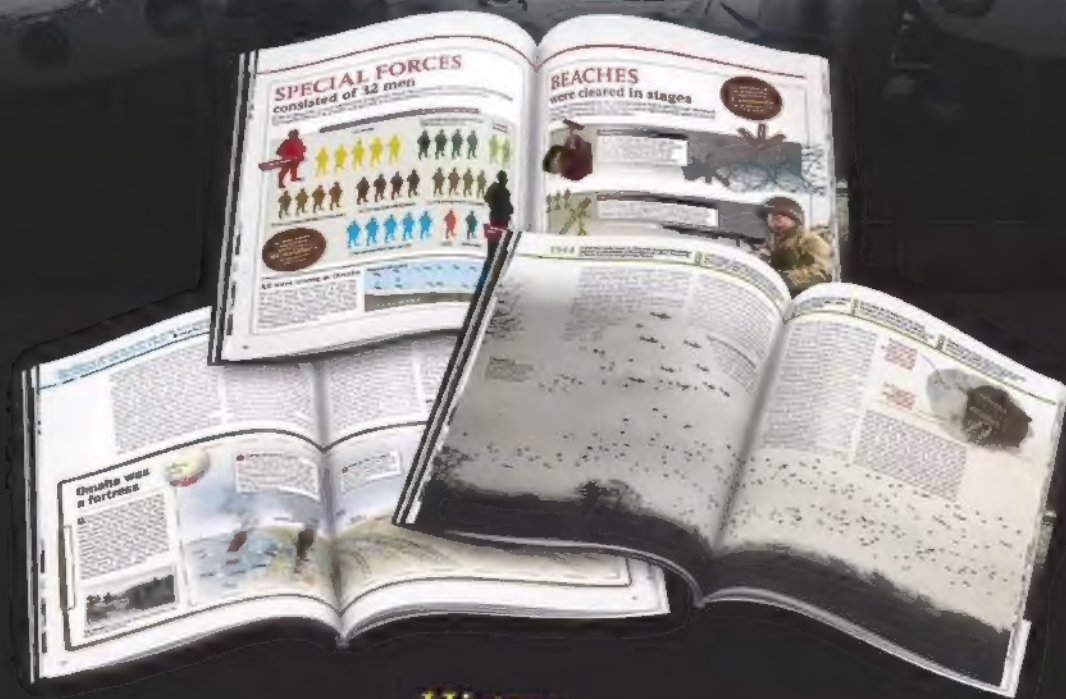
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The eyes of the world are upon you

General Dwight D Eisenhower in his final message to Allied soldiers before D-Day.

These were the words of the leader of the invasion force that, on 6th June 1944, headed for five beaches in Normandy to begin the liberation of Western Europe from German occupation. 156,000 soldiers were to be dropped behind German lines or landed on beaches where battle-hardened German machine gunners lay ready to unleash hell. This is the story of perhaps the most decisive day in world history, told by eyewitnesses: the British, US and German soldiers who experienced first-hand the fierce fighting on D-Day and in the days that followed.



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